

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47344/sdubss.v57i.005>

IRSTI: 19.45.91

Understanding the Dynamics Behind the Nuclear Referendum in Kazakhstan

Zhanel Sabirova

Georgetown University, Washington DC, USA

email: zs359@georgetown.edu

Abstract

In examining the motivations behind non-constitutional referendums, Kazakhstan contributes to the debate with its nuclear referendum held in October 2024. The paper argues that the nuclear referendum in Kazakhstan reflects national factors echoed in country's nuclear memory, and internal political dynamics, including governmental control over public opinion and security concerns. Despite official claims of transparency, comparison with the 2022 referendum and media reporting raises doubts about the vote's credibility.

Therefore, the qualitative research method required analyzing media coverage of nuclear referendum news including headlines from state owned and independent media sources of Kazakhstan. Thematic and framed analysis was done through Taguette software to identify recurring themes and discrepancies between official narratives and public discourse. The result of the analysis demonstrated that the government owned media strongly propagating on the benefits of NPP on the economic, social, and environmental development of the country, independent media significantly focused on opposing state narratives and bringing counter arguments in the pre-referendum public debate. Overall, the 2024 referendum illustrates how the government uses controlled participation to legitimize nuclear policy while limiting genuine democratic processes. The qualitative media analysis of state controlled and independent news agencies of Kazakhstan were evaluated to assess transparency and motivations behind the referendum.

Keywords: nuclear referendum, media assessment, Kazakhstan, consolidated authoritarianism, NPP.

Introduction

The concept of building a Nuclear Power Plant (NPP) in Kazakhstan has long been on the national agenda and took a more concrete turn after Republic of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev mentioned this initiative in his state-of-the-nation address in 2021. However, the topic subsequently sparked a big debate with a division between the state sector that desires to see the implementation of the project and civil movements that oppose building the plant due to the environmental and corruption concerns. Consequently, President Tokayev announced a nationwide referendum to be held on October 6, 2024.

The nature of the 2024 referendum on nuclear power is distinct in view of unusual consideration by the government to negotiate the building with the population, when such a trend for "negotiations" was not seen before. Another thing that raises big interest is the level of transparency of the results. Noticing the significant level of polarization between government and the society on the topic of NPP the results of the referendum is a good ground for the analysis of changes in the electoral system and may also reveal new dynamics behind referendums in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the main goal of the work is to understand why referendums are called in Kazakhstan and what their level of transparency may showcase about motivation/reasons behind referendum organization. Therefore, the

research question of this paper is as follows: what does Kazakhstan's recent referendum on nuclear power plant reveal about relations between the state and society?

The central claim of this study is that Kazakhstan's nuclear referendum reflects both national (with the national nuclear memory) and internal (such as governmental control over public opinion and security¹ concerns) political dynamics. Despite the government's assertions of transparency, the comparison to the 2022 referendum and media coverage raises serious questions about the validity of the process. Understanding transparency, therefore, will open a way to theorize motivation behind nuclear referendum organization further.

The 2024 nuclear referendum shows how the government of Kazakhstan employs multiple restrictions and controlled participation to legitimize nuclear policies while limiting democratic processes. By analyzing the referendum's motivations, transparency, and media coverage, this study demonstrates that referendums, as implemented in Kazakhstan, appear to be strategically designed to serve elite preferences rather than foster meaningful public engagement.

A qualitative media analysis of both state-controlled and alternative news sources will be used to test the nuclear referendum's transparency by identifying discrepancies between official narratives and public discourse.

Literature review: Theorizing politics of referendums

As for its definition by Suksi (1993), referendums are additional democratic institutions that assist main executives of a country. However, the author admits that there is no universal referendum terminology. And it is true that this peculiarity of referendum creates a good ground for research and comparative analyses. Anckar (2017) mentions the recommendation from Matt Qvortrup in his work that "there is no point in seeking a pattern where there is none". Here, however, we can raise the discussion on the common effect direct democracy brings to various states. Usually, referendums are considered a part of or a result of direct democracy. Therefore, it's clear that the mechanics behind this result is laid down on the basis of one of the main democratic values – peoples' votes. This direct participation of population traditionally is required to enhance legal changes, constitutional amendments, and legitimizing foundational laws (Suksi, 1993; Qvortrup, 2017, 2018). It is called constitutional referendums. Scholars note the prevalence of constitutional referendums in democratic countries (Altman, 2010; Qvortrup, 2017).

That creates two types of referendums – constitutional, or constitutionally regulated, and a policy vote or plebiscite (Suksi, 1993). The latter focuses on "other than constitutional" issues, which can be described as "politically sensitive issues of an *ad hoc* character". The latter, plebiscite, takes the stage when there is no permanent provision in the constitution and, thus, is organized when needed.

Anckar (2017) divides referendum types into constitutional and ethnic conflict referendums. While the former includes the same goal of legislative assessment, the latter dives into a broader understanding of the regime's influence on the referendum developments. Main finding of this work states that if the referendum aims to legitimize policies of homogenization, then the regime is most likely to be authoritarian by nature. They are defined as difference-eliminating type of referendum. Democratic regimes, on the contrary, seek to manage ethnic or national differences, which comprises difference-managing type of referendum. The other two types are secession and right-sizing referendums that deal with border issues. Here, the author claims that regime characteristics do not carry significant weight as an independent variable, since referendums happen both in democratic and

¹ By "security" the author means security concerns for the regime or maybe involved political actors.

non-democratic regimes. However, when distinctions are introduced in regard to the dependent variable, the regime then explains particular patterns: difference-eliminating referendums occur in authoritarian states, and difference-managing in democracies.

As a result, referendums are not exclusive for democratic regimes, but non-democratic states also organize them. Scholars generally agree, however, that referendums are used more frequently for constitutional issues than for non-constitutional matters, although variation in referendum types remains debated (Altman, 2010; Tierney, 2012; Suski, 1993; Qvortrup 2005). However, many works also underline no particular link of non-constitutional referendums dominating in non-democratic nations (LeDuc, 2003; Walker, 2003; Altman, 2010). Fragmentation, colonial heritage or geographical variance do not serve as a pattern for constitutional or policy vote referendum (Anckar, 2017). Although the evidence shows that two thirds of Asian and four fifth of Middle Eastern states avoid constitutional referendums, whereas more than two thirds African states are pro-referendum. However, noting that all regions are evidently weak in fair democratic spirit, here similarities cannot explain dissimilarities as these differences cannot be understood as a democracy consequence. The point that unites scholars' opinions relates to the "young" nature of referendums, which is just increasing in its usage by the states worldwide. Moreover, it is worth noting that this recent dynamic of increasing referendum occurrence seems substantial due to our traditional perception of voting through presidential-or-parliamentary elections.

Additionally, it is recognized by scholars that the conditions, reasons, and even outcomes of referendums differ according to geographical discrepancy, as each of the countries that resorted to referendums possesses different legislative rules and goals on referendums. Referendum is a supplementary formal institutional instrument that allows to expand the field of political debate and keep political actors stay within normative structure while striving for additional mobilization on behalf of their electorate (Mažylis & Jurgelionytė, 2012). *Ad hoc* referendums are usually not legally binding *de jure*, but its results are often interpreted as *de facto* by the state representative body (Setala, 1997). Referendums are justified in terms of the popular sovereignty that requires public consultation on an important political issue. As such, some topics, such as territorial changes or transfers of national powers to supranational organizations, require legitimization by the popular majority and referendum even if the referendum would not be required in the constitution.

However, apart from consultation aims, referendums are also widely used for symbolic legitimization of government policies. Such manipulated referendums commonly take place in authoritarian states (Setala, 1997; Collin 2019). Democratic states also may resort to such manipulations, but mostly on low-priority issues with few consequences. Nevertheless, the strategic reasons of referendums for political actors may be conceptualized as *policy outcome maximizing* and *power-maximizing motivations*. The latter seeks both - promoting policy for particular need or benefit and strengthening one's own position in the government. That said, the referendums held by authoritarian governments usually outcomes as almost unexceptionally supportive for the governmental policies. As stated by Smith (1976) a referendum may be considered as "a handy tool in the hands of dictators to boost their legitimacy". Therefore, the strategic reason for initiating an *ad hoc* referendum with power-maximizing motivation can be described as follows: governmental coalition/party is divided over a particular issue, and the referendum is used to avoid the split or the coalition/party or for the executive (state leader) to consolidate his or her power.

Nevertheless, Setala (1997) mentions that it is quite difficult to distinguish between various motivations and intentions of promoting referendums. Small number of *ad hoc* referendums prevents making far-reaching generalizations towards motivations behind such referendums. Therefore, all situations should be considered when trying to understand why the referendum was held. It is

important not to underestimate the importance of the political culture, national experiences or international examples in explaining the demand for referendums.

Reasons behind nuclear referendums

A nuclear referendum is a suitable case study for the analysis of the *ad hoc* or policy vote referendums, as its non-constitutional nature raises the question of the motivation of governments to resort for citizen consultation on this topic. There is no general theoretical framework that could explain the common reasons behind nuclear referendums, as given that among the relatively small number of referendums held worldwide nuclear referendums are of a rarer nature. Yet there is a common argument that the perceived danger of nuclear power plants and potential construction costs makes it a controversial issue, where governments may want to test public opinion through referendums. For instance, public opposition to NPPs arise from concerns about safety, waste management, and high financial risks. Examples like Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters deeply impacted public attitudes, with surveys showing fluctuating support for nuclear power based on framing (e.g., energy security or climate change mitigation) (Murakami & Anbumozhi, 2020).

Although Western countries comprise the majority of NPP owners and active users of referendums, their motivations of resorting to nuclear referendums are similar in general. Despite the “renaissance” of nuclear energy consideration since the 90s and mid-2000s with 50 NPPs under construction worldwide prior to 2010, there is also an opinion that the Fukushima incident made European public somehow damp the promotion of nuclear energy (Müller and Thurner, 2017). This argument is also nurtured by some member states of the EU to abandon it. Nevertheless, the “EU Energy Roadmap 2050” highlights that nuclear energy will continue to play a crucial role in the EU energy generation efforts as contributing to lower greenhouse gas options to fight climate change and lower electricity prices and production costs.

Rather scholars tend to test and/or explain voting behavior during nuclear referendums. We can perceive referendums and its voting behavior through a more common perception of elections. Marsh (2017) emphasizes the salience of looking at a conditionality while researching referendums and its voting behavior. As the topic of various referendums vary substantially from elections, campaign plays an important role in referendum arrangements, because society needs to possess at least basic knowledge of the given issue before making a decision. TV and Radio coverage, campaign advertisements, public debates, and even politically oriented social media content are especially pivotal in opinion formation and especially critical for referendums (Pignataro and Prarolo, 2020).

Examination of voting behavior in nuclear referendums shows that the main driving factor defining the Italian population’s vote for or against Nuclear Power Plant building in the 2011 referendum concerned healthcare issues. However, those residents, who lived closer to the existing power plant, were against the new construction, which shows their comprehension of the information about NPP as a determinant for their choice. Correspondingly, those who lived further away from the power plant voted in favor of the building (Pignataro and Prarolo, 2020). The Lithuanian nuclear referendum of 2008 shows that “normative” behavior of voters was formed by long experienced campaign practices of the previous referendums, which benefited the government’s desired referendum result (Mažylis and Jurgelionyté, 2012). The problem of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Station was reflected in the media portals that were used to analyse referendum’s campaign. One of the challenges during the research work became the manipulation of the campaign occurrence in these portals: other campaigns of a different nature, such as the issue of double citizenship, higher education reform, were dominating the portals as well as other mass media and general public. Media coverage of the 2013

Bulgarian referendum was believed to have been relatively balanced even while Bulgarians had negative evaluations of the independence of the Bulgarian media (Bagashka, 2014). However, in contrast to presidential, or other political elections, the lower pressure on the media is also explained by the little level of importance attached to the nuclear referendum. What is crucial to understand from these cases is the special place of pre/post referendum campaigns and media coverage. Therefore, the media gives crucial insights that help identify, or search for the possible hidden reasons behind nuclear referendum organization.

Kazakhstan's Nuclear History

In 2009, the 64th Session of the United Nations General Assembly declared 29th of August as the International Day against Nuclear Tests. The resolution was initiated by the Republic of Kazakhstan and a number of sponsors and co-sponsors with reference to commemorating the closure of the Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test site on 29 August 1991. Overall, 456 nuclear tests were conducted at the Semipalatinsk site by the Soviet Union from 1949 until 1989. The Soviet government had paid little regard to the effect of testing on the local environment and the health of the local population. Soviet authorities hid radiation exposure impacts on the people for the whole period of testing activities and until its collapse. According to various estimates, over 1.5 million people in Kazakhstan were exposed to nuclear fallout over the years (Yan, 2019). All life near the testing sites were negatively affected (Brunn, 2010). Semey (former Semipalatinsk) city is 130 km away from the polygon. Other large cities near Semey are Pavlodar to the northwest, Karaganda to the southwest, and Novosibirsk to the north of Semey and together these 4 cities comprised over 2 million people during Soviet Union times.

As a result, public attitudes in Kazakhstan have often been shaped by negative perceptions of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials (Hodgson, 2025). One can state that collective or national memory is still fresh in the mind of the population.

Kassenova (2014) highlights that devastating results of Soviet nuclear testing created a home climate that made it easier to get rid of nuclear equipment and weapons. Furthermore, the nuclear industry was in financial ruin, military forces had not yet been established, and political resistance was minimal, so there were no powerful organizations that might be pro-nuclear. She also discusses the importance of referring to Kazakhstan's past to understand the country's present nuclear policy. Kazakhstan officially became a nuclear-free state in the 1990s after ratifying a Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1992. Given Kazakhstan's ambitious aspirations for the development of nuclear energy, its obvious lack of interest in weaponization, grants it extra credibility in the nonproliferation arena. Additionally, in spite of Kazakhstan's antipathy toward anything related to nuclear today, there is still some aspects of Soviet legacy remaining relevant today. For instance, Kazakhstan benefits from the facilities and experience that were directly brought about by the Soviet era in its quest for a sophisticated nuclear sector.

On nuclear referendums in Kazakhstan

Approximately 80% of global uranium is produced by five major countries, among which Kazakhstan possesses 39% of the requirements of world nuclear power (Nurysheva et al., 2020). Nuclear industry is one of the most promising resource sectors in terms of producing additional energy for domestic and external needs. Currently fossil fuels are a major source of electricity in Kazakhstan. Considering Kazakhstan's aspirations of reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2060, nuclear power is regarded as one of the most efficient ways to implement this strategy. However, given the

population's nuclear memory regarding Soviet times, building a nuclear power plant raised concerns among citizens (Pannier, 2024).

Many previous studies have examined general attitudes about the use of referendums on a specific policy matter (Bowler and Donovan 2019; Gherghina 2019). Talking about Kazakhstan or Central Asia, Schiller (2017) in his work of presenting comparative analysis of local referendums highlights the lack of information for these countries because of the uncommonness of referendums and the authoritarian nature of the state regimes.

In general, the topic of referendums in Kazakhstan was not practically disclosed in deep analytical research by scholars, not speaking about non-constitutional (nuclear) referendums (Satbayev, 2018). Major policy outlets and general referendum theory texts discuss Kazakhstan's referendums primarily as case examples, especially focusing on legal norms and procedures rather than broader political science analysis (Charyyeva & Pan 2024, Zhanuzakova 2018). That showcases that the academic engagement on the discussion of political referendums in Kazakhstan is narrow.

Additionally, media space in Kazakhstan operates under significant state influence (Reporters Without Borders, 2025). This limits the space for independent journalism and critical reporting. Most outlets considered to function more as a propaganda outlets and independent sources facing some pressure. Reporters Without Borders also indicates the lack of public filtering of media message. Therefore, this suggests the domination of state narratives in political context. Beldibekova et al. (2024) study on protests reveal that government authorities restrict journalistic independence by revealing selective coverage and reliance on foreign sources for unfiltered information flows when local media avoid contentious topics. Thus, Kazakhstan's experience reflects broader patterns of digital authoritarianism (Rakhmetov, 2025).

Given such argumentation, Kazakhstan emerges as a necessary case to analyze and (hopefully) update the academic community on some additional insights on the theme of referendums and its usage. Understanding the transparency level of the referendum held and linking these results to identify involved political actors' motivation will significantly contribute to the studies of uncommon, or in our case nuclear referendums. Therefore, to understand the drivers behind Kazakhstan's nuclear referendum it is important to understand Kazakhstan's nuclear history and nuclear memory, which is discussed in the next section.

The background of 2024 nuclear referendum

The timelapse of the nuclear power plant construction issues in Kazakhstan starts with President Tokayev's state-of-the-nation address in 2021. The question of energy scarcity and the need for NPP was officially brought for the nation. Afterwards, with the announcement by the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan about public hearings on a NPP building site decision on 20th August 2022, the continuing debate between state and population was concluded in September 2023 with the announcement of the nuclear referendum to be held in the second half of 2024 (Akorda, 2023). The referendum was held on 6th of October 2024, where citizens of Kazakhstan had to answer yes/no on the question "Do you agree with the construction of a nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan?" With 73.11% in favor, it became clear that Kazakhstan will pass into the list of nuclear energy users. Registered voter turnout comprises 12,284,487 people or 63.66%, where 26.89% were against the construction. Out of 18 regions, Turkistan demonstrated the highest participation and the most positive result with 78% of voting in favor. Interestingly, the most populated and economically developed area of Kazakhstan – Almaty city – showed one of the worst participation statistics with only 25% eligible citizens attending the voting.

In Kazakhstan, the legal framework governing referendums is established by the Republican Referendum Law of 1995 and the country's Constitution. According to this framework, the power to propose a referendum lies primarily with the President of Kazakhstan, who can initiate the process directly. This mechanism is the most commonly used and reflects the highly centralized nature of political decision-making in the country. The Parliament of Kazakhstan plays a supportive role, often reviewing or approving referendum proposals initiated by the President, but it does not have the authority to propose referendums independently. Unlike in some countries, Kazakhstan does not allow for citizen-driven initiatives to propose referendums. This absence of grassroots mechanisms further underscores the top-down structure of the process.

For a referendum to be legally binding, it must meet specific procedural requirements: 1) a minimum threshold of 50% of registered voters participating must be met to validate a referendum and 2) a simple majority of voters voted "yes". Once a referendum passes all legal thresholds, its outcome is binding and must be implemented.

The nuclear referendum is the fourth ever vote held in the history of Kazakhstan and only second since the establishment of the new constitution in 1995. Although the 1995 referendum was based on a legislative issue, comparison of the nuclear referendum with the second 2022 Constitutional referendum gives more insights towards the referendum culture development in Kazakhstan. Both voting experienced not a large difference in turnout indicators, even though more people took part in the constitutional referendum with 68.05% registered voters in 2022 and 63.66% in 2024.

Eastern Kazakhstan region depicts interesting insights of its voting history in 2022 Constitutional and 2024 nuclear referendum history. First of all, Eastern Kazakhstan is exactly the region, where nuclear test sites were conducted for almost forty years. The turnout of the East Kazakhstan region in the 2022 referendum comprised 77% with 77.21% "yes" answers. In the 2024 nuclear referendum the turnout for the region comprised 71% with 60% in favor of the power plant.

The need for referendums and public debate

It is worth taking a look at the nature of initiations of both referendums. The Constitutional referendum took place on 5 June 2022. At the time Kazakhstan had been through the 2022 January protests, which arose from a less contentious energy policy decision, but erupted into an armed conflict and threat of government overthrow. In the aftermath, Tokayev initiated a new reform program "Zhana Kazakhstan (New Kazakhstan)" and proposed amendments into the constitution following violent civil unrest caused by worsening economic conditions and subsequent calls for rapid political reform. Therefore, it can be clearly seen that the 2022 referendum resulted from a proposal of the president himself. However, the path to establish the nuclear referendum experienced civil backlash towards building power plants and contradicting opinions with the state's desires in favor of the plant. Regarding the aforementioned timespan discussion, with the announcement of building NPP the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Kazakhstan announced public negotiations on plant's placement. This action was seen as required since criticism blew up from the population that was concerned about the environmental and economic costs of the construction (Nelson, 2024). Afterwards, multiple public hearings were organized by the government in various regions of Kazakhstan.

As for the transparency of pre-referendum debates, it cannot be claimed as entirely fair. To be clear, the main root of the debate lies in the polarization between state and public opinions towards NPP: state acts in a strong support of NPP, referring to energy problems and faster low-carbon transition; whereas population is still echoing its nuclear memory and scrutinizes effects on the

environment (Ospanova, 2024). Both referendums faced similar criticisms regarding transparency, media bias, and unequal participation opportunities of the observers, raising questions about the effectiveness of referendums as democratic tools in Kazakhstan (ODIHR, 2022; Azattyq, 2024). The legally centralized approach of referendum organization, as well as the absence of citizen-driven initiatives, raises questions about the inclusivity and transparency of the referendum mechanism in the country. However, unlike the 2022 referendum, the nuclear referendum was *de facto* arisen by population concerns. At least such narratives create an image that the government made a decision to bring a debatable issue for a broader public decision-making. Nevertheless, the population still had questions towards the fairness of the referendum results, which can be derived from the modest turnout indicator of the most populous and developed city such as Almaty. Despite the officially high turnout and a large number of votes in support of the construction, observers and public figures doubt the reality of such results. They point to both violations in the voting process and the dynamics of the decline in the electoral activity of citizens in previous years. The decline in interest in the referendum this time was facilitated by the disappointment of Kazakhs in the unfulfilled promises after January events (Vaal, 2024).

In this regard, testing the transparency level of media coverage of the nuclear referendum in Kazakhstan will give valuable and deeper insights on the motivation behind holding an *ad hoc* referendum in Kazakhstan. In the next sections, the study delves into understanding whether Kazakhstan's government initiates voting in pursuance of direct democracy or intends to use it as a sort of democratic window dressing to serve the elite preferences.

Methodology

To understand the transparency levels of the 2024 nuclear referendum, considerable attention was given to local media sources. The distinction between state owned/controlled and independent media is made for analytical work. First, the official narrative from state-controlled sources was identified. Afterwards, this information was contrasted with the external reports or news headlines of independent media. Therefore, this study deploys *thematic analysis* to identify recurring themes and patterns in media content to analyze transparency levels.

Ten independent and ten state-controlled media coverages which are widely used among the Kazakhstani citizens were selected. Media coverages that were released throughout two particular periods were taken for a broader depiction and comprehension of referendum results. First period covers ten media sources (five state and five independent) covering referendum information one month before voting: from 6th September until 5th October in 2024. Second period included the rest ten news headlines from 6th October 2024 onwards, thus, one month after the voting. Hence, a total of twenty media news articles about the nuclear referendum were analyzed. As for the media channels, Caspiana: A Digital Toolbox for Students and Scholars of Central Asia and the South Caucasus website that is run by The Program on Central Asia at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, Harvard University was chosen. The toolbox provides links to selected media sources separately for each of the regions spreading east and west of the Caspian Sea, including Kazakhstan. Both independent and state-controlled media channels are incorporated in the toolbox. Finally, the independent media sources such as *Azattyq*, *Eurasianet*, *Forbes*, *Tengrinews*, *Vlast.kz*, *Novaya Gazeta Kazakhstan* and the government-controlled media like *BaigeNews*, *Egemen Kazakhstan*, *Kazakhstanskaya pravda*, *KazINFORM*, *BaqKZ* were analyzed.

To ensure media channels with as wide a readership as possible, most of the Russian-language

news were taken. Two state channels (*Egemen Qazaqstan* and *BAQ.KZ*) provide articles only in Kazakh language and EurasiaNet's referendum report was only in English language. The author sought to collect similar in style articles that would highlight how the nuclear referendum will be organized in Kazakhstan and provide background information, mentioning about the state of NPP question in the country. Initial plan also included analyzing international media agencies. However, due to the enormous workload with the state and independent media coverages international media are left for further research.

The data was processed through Taguette software, which is a free and open-source qualitative research tool. The software helps to organize, annotate, collaborate on, analyze, and visualize the work (Rampin et al, 2021). With the uploading of documents, researchers can qualitatively highlight sections of text. That allows to organize or reorganize highlights in the hierarchical tags, which can be modified, merged, recreated again, etc. Alongside thematic analysis it was also important to analyze how media outlets portray events, focusing on the narrative and tone through *framing analysis*. Overall, three readings of the article were required to be able to generalize tags. In the first reading the author made an initial or "draft" conclusion on the positioning of the article whether it is in favor, against, or neutral in building nuclear power plant. The first reading also helped the author to think and keep in mind basic tags that could be attached to certain paragraphs or the parts. On the second reading the author narrowed down the focus to each sentence and tagged them with specific codes: government control, voter education, fairness, media bias, etc. One article ended up with multiple of the codes after second reading. The third reading then was more for validating all of the given codes, making corrections, and ensuring the final version of the tags. Then the author proceeded to analyze all of the given tags and organize them into broader categories, like "procedural transparency" or "public engagement", etc. For instance, articles discussing voter suppression or lack of public consultation are grouped under "lack of transparency." After understanding such recurring themes, data was framed by examining how state-run media emphasized fairness and independent media questioned transparency.

Results

Overall, 347 tags were made for both independent and state media sources in two periods. In the period before the referendum five independent media articles were coded with 116 tags, and government owned ones received 46 tags. News headlines released after the voting received 150 tags for independent and 39 for state-controlled media. The two media categories differ from each other substantially with independent media mostly covering voter violation rights and state media reciting government statements and focusing on preparedness for the upcoming referendum.

As for the tone of the media, it can be concluded that media coverage of independent sources has a way more negative sentiments towards the quality of the debate prior to the referendum. The pre-referendum campaign and public hearings were heavily criticized for unequal opportunities to express opinions between critics of NPP and state-friendly agitators. The most often used tags were "public criticism" occurring 14 times, "lack of transparency" 11 times, "state pressure" 11 times, and "lack of debate" and "media restrictions" nine times. Public criticism included lines discussing human or electoral rights violations and improper organization of public hearings in different regions. Many mentions were about the fact that during public debates on state organized public hearings opposition representatives always had troubles accessing microphones and voicing their concerns, while state backed experts were not giving objective counterarguments of NPP building, focusing only on its benefits. However, self-organized gatherings of negotiation events always were considered illegitimate and, thus, prohibited by law.

By comparison, state media had a highly positive tone towards building NPP and public debates. During the same public hearings state media was highlighting the high quality of the public debates. Even if some arguments with NPP construction or its effect on surrounding would pop up during discussions, they would always back up with explanatory arguments that this problem of detail is quite solvable. Therefore, “Quality public debate” tag received the largest mentioning of eight times among five pre-referendum articles and “NPP benefits” tag was labelled five times. NPP benefits cited the efficient energy development, uranium resources, and environmental security. However, environmental issues were also differently portrayed in state and independent media: when independent agencies always drew attention to the water management problems if NPP will be built in the village of *Ulken* on the shores of Balkhash Lake. On the other hand, state media did not mention the water management issues much and focused on the future prospects of the nuclear power plant bringing the increase of employment opportunities and economic development of the village and its citizens.

The post-referendum tone stays more or less the same for the independent media with “lack of transparency” occurring ten times and “voter violation” occurring 13 times. The latter took much more attention with the articles discussing cases when multiple-bulletin-throwing frauds on the day of the voting. However, state media changed a little in its narratives and switched into more general and short informing on referendum results and official acceptance of NPP construction.

In addition, the number of the tags refers to the lengths of the articles. As it can be seen, independent media provided much more information than state media. That is why the former received more tags labelled during the analysis. As such, independent media seemed to be more concerned in investigating, as well as informing the masses on not just pros and cons of NPP building. Rather, articles discussed what kind of injustices were happening before and after the referendum. That media narrative shows the connection between the referendum organization and regime definition for the population. Multiple restrictions that were occurring during the public campaigns were criticized and contradicted to the good features of direct democracy.

However, another noteworthy aspect is the content of the articles. As for the state media, both in pre- and post-referendum periods, some of the channels were delivering identical arguments. All of the five agencies often referred to state representatives’ words and speeches about NPP prospects in Kazakhstan. Hence, in the pre-voting period both *Egemen Qazaqstan* and *Kazinform* cited the words of the Chairman of Kazakhstani Parliament Erlan Koshanov that Kazakhstan held the longest public debate campaign of 400 days in its history on the issues of nuclear energy and NPP. That is apparently the aim of showing the level of democracy in Kazakhstan by state media. Nevertheless, all five government owned media channels had the same narrative of favoring state nuclear policies. However, independent media did not show the same correlation with each other, resulting in *Tengrinews* and *Forbes* being neutral towards the issue given and simply delivering the updates on the upcoming referendum. However, the remaining media sources tried to highlight the referendum issues with larger details and information, recreating almost reports for the population.

Overall, it can be summed that the nuclear referendum of 2024 cannot be called as a transparent event and the voting cannot be judged as fair. With the pre- and post-criticism towards public engagement and procedural transparency by independent media, state media still resorted considerable efforts to counter independent media’s narrative. That leads to the argument that the government clearly needed a “yes” answer for the referendum results. The next section will discuss the possible motivations of the government to resort to cheating while conducting referendums and its decision to undertake a direct democratic method in achieving that goal.

Discussion

Other than assessment of transparency level, media serves as a great source for further understanding and questioning of the given topic. The official state narrative was openly in favor of nuclear power plant construction with the president Tokayev leading this initiative himself (Dalton, 2025; Akorda, 2021). Energy scarcity and environmental incentives were the major claimed reasons. Gaining public support was achieved through the nuclear referendum, with the majority answering “yes”. However, is this referendum inherently democratic in its nature? As it can be seen from media analysis of the previous section, referendum results were not absolutely corresponding to the theoretical assets and rules of conduct of direct democracy.

Referendum was used by the government in an effective way, as now it is concluded that “the population is in favor of the NPP”. The reason why it is thought a referendum would be helpful in getting society on the side of the government in the nuclear issue might be the difficulty in challenging the final decision of the vote. It might be the case, given that *de jure* referendum is a direct tool of democracy and population was in fact consulted for the decision-making. Therefore, *de facto* situation is more complex to be revealed truthfully and successfully.

Following Hodgson (2025), Kazakh government during Nazarbayev presidency successfully integrated the legacy of nuclear testing into new post-Soviet identity of Kazakhstan, while reinforcing state legitimacy through narratives of victimhood and resilience. By intertwining top-down state narratives with bottom-up collective memory, the regime successfully cultivated a historical discourse into international leadership for peace and disarmament. However, he noted further that foreign policy success faced internal tensions associated with “active forgetting” in Kazakhstan.

This political discourse evolves further with the Tokayev regime’s “New Kazakhstan and listening state” vision. Therefore, the new government of Kazakhstan finds holding nuclear referendums as an inevitable step in deciding the nuclear policy of the state. Together with the NPP construction plans announced by President Tokayev in 2021 the public hearing and negotiations were arranged even before the announcement of the referendum organization plans. Thus, the government might not have been able to imply the NPP construction policy directly, beware of a bigger combat from population in the future.

The nuclear history of Kazakhstan implies the argument by Setala (1997) on the usage of referendums as potentially educative devices to encourage people to discuss and deliberate about political issues. State controlled media appears to be certain in its attitude towards the NPP with “NPP benefits” gaining majority tags in during media analysis. However, independent media instead is still not certain. It endures the provision of all possible pros and cons and tries to engage the population as much as possible into more details of the problem aiming to create proper public debate and objective evaluation.

At the same time the narrative of the independent media has been focusing on the function of counterparty what can be considered a state propaganda and endured much “emotional tone”. On the other hand, the inability of citizens to be good in making sound political judgments is the most typical criticism against all types of referendums (Setala, 1997). Therefore, independent media focused on presenting deeper analysis of NPP effects to its readers. That is apparent through “public debate” tag dominating the narrative and, therefore, importance of providing democratic assessment.

Additionally, with the expansion of state activity, political issues in modern societies are too complicated and often too remote to be understood by laypeople. In this regard Kazakhstan may resort to referendum considering the possible biased opinion of Kazakhs towards NPPs given its nuclear history, and therefore, appear blind to its energy benefits. There might be two implications: state may

hope to re-educate the population about nuclear policies or state may know real cost-benefit sides of NPP that are unknown for broader population. Although that does not justify unfair conduct of the referendum, the government may consider this the worth dealing risk.

Another reason for legitimizing the policy decision through referendum might be the combination of the two strategic considerations posed by Setala (1997): (1) the issue threatens the electoral success of a party and the referendum is used to remove the issue from the electoral agenda; and (2) the referendum is used to consolidate the powers of the executive and to promote the policies favored by him or her. Although parties are not powerful independent players in Kazakhstan's government, the issue of removing nuclear issue from future electoral agenda, combined with President Tokayev's personal understandings of the future of Kazakhstan might make sense and serve as one of the perspectives in understanding resorting to referendum.

Dosym Satpayev, Kazakh political scientist, sees the reason for such behavior of the authorities is the fear of society, which remains high after the January events and is growing in connection with the approaching transition of power. As for him, now the elites are discussing whether President Tokayev will extend his term in office by changing the Constitution (apparently through referendum) or find a successor. The active lobby for construction shows that Tokayev wants to ensure security guarantees in the future through the NPP. Construction will take from five to ten years and will fall during the transition period and those who will build are interested in the stability of the regime. Some analysts argue that governmental behavior of referring to referendum reflects heightened sensitivity to public reaction following the January events, as well as uncertainty surrounding an upcoming political transition (Satbayev, 2024). In this context, the active promotion of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as nuclear power plant construction, can be interpreted as an effort to secure long-term political and economic stability.

Against the background of the transition, an increase in the repressive tendency that manifested itself during the referendum is expected. The January events, according to Satpayev, showed how social conflict can overlap with intra-elite conflict. Therefore, the authorities will do everything in their power to combat those expressing discontent in society, since they see them as a source of instability (Vaal, 2024). As a result, the 2024 nuclear referendum appears to be deployed as democratic window dressing to serve the elite preferences.

Conclusion

Today the nuclear agenda of Kazakhstan is concerned with the planning and negotiations of building a nuclear power plant with the prospective stakeholders. In the 2024, the nuclear referendum in Kazakhstan showed its "agreement" to enlarge the list of nuclear reactor's owners. As such, there are many points that make Kazakhstan's nuclear referendum an interesting case to examine, from the uncertainties over referendum theories in academia towards understanding the motivations of the nuclear one in Kazakhstan.

Given that constitutional referendums are a more frequent occurrence than any other type of referendum, nuclear referendums present even more questions and interests towards them. Therefore, all cases should be considered separately when trying to understand why the referendum was held. The 2024 nuclear referendum demonstrates how the government of Kazakhstan employs multiple restrictions and controlled participation to legitimize nuclear policies while limiting pure democratic processes. By analyzing the referendum's motivations, transparency, and media coverage, this study reveals that referendums, as implemented in Kazakhstan, are seem to be strategically designed to serve elite preferences rather than foster meaningful public engagement.

Therefore, the qualitative research method required analyzing media coverage of nuclear referendum news including headlines from state owned and independent media sources of Kazakhstan. Thematic and framed analysis was done through Taguette software that was needed to identify recurring themes and discrepancies between official narratives and public discourse.

From the analysis, it can be concluded that the 2024 nuclear referendum lacked the transparency to ensure fair voting on the given issue. The result of the analysis demonstrated that the government owned media strongly propagating on the benefits of NPP on the economic, social, and environmental development of the country, independent media significantly focused on opposing state narratives and bringing counter arguments in the pre-referendum public debate. However, after the referendum day, independent media reported on various voter rights violations and cases of fraud. At the time, state media switched into a more neutral tone mostly reporting on the results of the voting.

There might be several reasons behind the government's decision to hold the referendum and ensure a "yes" outcome. From one perspective, with regard to the nuclear history of Kazakhstan, the government could treat referendums as potentially educative devices to encourage people to discuss and learn from experts about nuclear issues. From the other side, referendums might be a tool to consolidate the powers of the executive and to promote the policies favored by him/her or a group of elites. Thus, the authorities could imply voting to ensure and stabilize nuclear policy and security concerns for a longer time period.

References

Akorda. (2023). President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's State of the Nation Address "Economic course of a Just Kazakhstan". Retrieved November 4, 2025 from <https://www.akorda.kz/en/president-kassym-jomart-tokayevs-state-of-the-nation-address-economic-course-of-a-just-kazakhstan-283243>

Akorda. (2021). The Head of State held a meeting on the development of the electric power industry. Retrieved October 28, 2025 from <https://akorda.kz/en/the-head-of-state-held-a-meeting-on-the-development-of-the-electric-power-industry-2641630>

Altman, D. (2010). *Direct democracy worldwide*. Cambridge University Press.

Anckar, D. (2017). *Why referendums?: On appearances and absences. The Routledge Handbook to Referendums and Direct Democracy*. Routledge.

Bagashka, T. (2014). The Bulgarian "Nuclear Referendum" of 2013 and the independence of the Bulgarian media. *East European Politics*, 30(4), 568-587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2014.960520>

Bowler, S., & Donovan, T. (2019). Perceptions of referendums and democracy: The referendum disappointment gap. *Politics and Governance*, 7(2), 227-241. <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v7i2.1874>

Brunn, S. D. (2010). Fifty Years of Soviet Nuclear Testing in Semipalatinsk, Kazakhstan: Juxtaposed Worlds of Blasts and Silences, Security and Risks, Denials and Memory. *Engineering Earth*, 1789–1818. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9920-4_101

Charyyeva, J., & Pan, Y. (2024). Kazakhstan's Nuclear Future Depends on More Than a Referendum. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Retrieved October 23, 2025 from <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2024/10/kazakhstan-nuclear-referendum?lang=en>

Collin, K. (2019). Populist and authoritarian referendums: The role of direct democracy in democratic deconsolidation. Brookings policy brief, Democracy and Disorder. Retrieved November 23, 2025 from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/FP_20190226_direct_democracy_collin.pdf

Dalton, D. (2025). Kazakhstan Will Need More Nuclear Plants, President Says In State Of Nation Address. *Nucnet*. Retrieved on November 20, 2025 from: <https://www.nucnet.org/news/kazakhstan-will-need-more-nuclear-plants-president-says-in-state-of-nation-address-9-2-2025>

Gherghina, S. (2019). How political parties use referendums: An analytical framework. *East European Politics and Societies*, 33(3), 677-690. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418803164>

Hodgson, T. (2025). Banishing the ‘Monster’: The Traumatic Memory of Nuclear Testing in Kazakhstan’s Post-soviet National Identity. *The Webster Review of International History*, 5(1). <https://websterreview.lse.ac.uk/articles/104/files/686fe1299ae37.pdf>

Kassenova, T. (2014). Kazakhstan and the global nuclear order. *Central Asian Affairs*, 1(2), 273-286. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00102006>

LeDuc, L. (2003). *The politics of direct democracy: Referendums in global perspective*. University of Toronto Press.

Marsh, M. (2017). *Voting behavior in referendums. The Routledge Handbook of Elections, Voting Behavior and Public Opinion*. Routledge.

Mažylis, L., & Jurgelionytė, A. (2012). The Lithuanian Referendum on extending the working of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Station: the rationality of actors within (un-) changing structures. *Baltic Journal of Law & Politics*, 5(1), 117-136. <https://doi.org/10.2478/v10076-012-0006-y>

Murakami, T. & Anbumozhi, V. (2020). *Public Perception and Acceptance of Nuclear Power: Stakeholder Issues and Community Solutions*. ERIA Research Project Report, No.08. Retrieved October 26, 2025 from <https://www.eria.org/uploads/media/Research-Project-Report/RPR-2020-08-Public-Perception-and-Acceptance-of-Nuclear-Power/Public-Perception-Acceptance-Nuclear-Power-Stakeholder-Issues-Community-Solutions.pdf>

Müller, W. C., & Thurner, P. W. (2017). *The politics of nuclear energy in Western Europe*. Oxford University Press.

Nelson., H. (2024). Kazakhstan’s New Nuclear Problem: Lake Balkhash. Caspian Policy Center. Retrieved October 28, 2025 from <https://caspianpolicy.org/research/regional-central-asia/kazakhstans-new-nuclear-problem-lake-balkhash>

Nurysheva, G., Amrebayeva, Z., & Amrebayev, A. (2020). The Kazakh Ethical Tradition and Anti-nuclear Ethics. *Energy Justice Across Borders*, 71.

OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). (2022). Republic of Kazakhstan Referendum, 5 June 2022. ODIHR Referendum Assessment Mission Final Report. Retrieved November 4, 2025 from <https://odihr.osce.org/odihr/elections/kazakhstan/528444>

Ospanova., A., Men, V., & Jalilov, A. (2024). A nuclear power plant in Kazakhstan: pros and cons. Retrieved November 8, 2025 from <https://factcheck.kz/en/Analytics/a-nuclear-power-plant-in-kazakhstan-pros-and-cons/>

Pannier. B. (2023). Central Asia in Focus: Kazakhstan’s Referendum on Nuclear Power. Caspian Policy Center. Retrieved October 29, 2025 from <https://www.caspianpolicy.com/research/category/central-asia-in-focus-kazakhstans-referendum-on-nuclear-power>

Pearce. F. (2017). Exposed: Soviet cover-up of nuclear fallout worse than Chernobyl. New Scientist. Retrieved November 5, 2025 from <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2125202-exposed->

soviet-cover-up-of-nuclear-fallout-worse-than-chernobyl/

Pignataro, G., & Prarolo, G. (2020). Learning, proximity and voting: theory and empirical evidence from nuclear referenda. *Social Choice and Welfare*, 55, 117-147. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00355-019-01233-2>

Qvortrup, M. (2005). *A comparative study of referendums: Government by the people*. Manchester University Press.

Rakhmetov, B. (2025). Internet Censorship in Authoritarian Contexts: A Case Study of Kazakhstan. *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/18793665251411329>

Rampin et al., (2021). Taguette: open-source qualitative data analysis. *Journal of Open Source Software*, 6(68), 3522, <https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.03522>

Reporters Without Borders. (2025). Country Review: Kazakhstan, 2025. Retrieved from: <https://rsf.org/en/country/kazakhstan>

Satpayev, D. (2018). Institute of Referendum in the Republic of Kazakhstan. *Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art & Communication*, 8. http://www.tojdac.org/tojdac/VOLUME8-SPTMSPCL_files/tojdac_v080SSE300.pdf

Schiller, T. (2017). *Local referendums: A comparative assessment of forms and practice. The Routledge handbook to referendums and direct democracy*. Routledge.

Setala, M. T. (1997). Theories of referendum and the analysis of agenda-setting. London School of Economics and Political Science. Retrieved October 10, 2025 from <https://etheses.lse.ac.uk/1485/1/U109490.pdf>

Smith, G. (1976). The functional properties of the referendum. *European journal of political research*, 4(1), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.1976.tb00787.x>

Suksi, M. (1993). *Bringing in the people: A comparison of constitutional forms and practices of the referendum*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.

Tierney, S. (2012). *Constitutional referendums: The theory and practice of republican deliberation*. Oxford University Press.

Vaal., T. (2024). Referendum po AES ne imeyet nichego obshego s pryamoy demokratiyey. [The referendum on the nuclear power plant has nothing to do with direct democracy]. Retrieved from November 14, 2025 from <https://vlast.kz/politika/62184-referendum-po-aes-ne-imeet-nichego-obsego-s-pramoj-demokratiej.html>

Walker, M. (2003). *The strategic use of referendums: Power, legitimacy, and democracy*. Springer.

Yan, W. (2019). The nuclear sins of the Soviet Union live on in Kazakhstan. *Nature* 568 (7750), 22-4. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-01034-8>

Zhanuzakova, L. (2018). K voprosu o sovershenstvovanii zakonodatel'stva o referendumme [On the Question of Improving the Legislation on Referendum]. Scientific and legal journal «Bulletin of the Institute of Legislation and Legal Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan», 1(50). <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/k-voprosu-o-sovershenstvovanii-zakonodatelstva-o-referendumme/viewer>

FTAMP: 19.45.91

Қазақстандағы ядролық референдум динамикасын түсіну

Жанель Сабирова

Джорджтаун университеті, Вашингтон қаласы, Колумбия округі, АҚШ

email: zs359@georgetown.edu

Аннотация

Конституциялық емес референдумдардың артындағы уәждердің түсіну түргысынан алғанда, Қазақстанда 2024 жылы қазанда өткен ядролық референдум осы тақырыпқа қатысты ғылыми пікірталасқа өз үлесін қосады. Бұл мақалада Қазақстандағы ядролық референдум елдің ядролық жадысымен үндес үлттық факторларды және ішкі саяси динамиканы, соның ішінде үкіметтің қоғамдық пікірді бақылауы мен қауіпсіздікке қатысты аландаушылықтарды көрсетеді деп тұжырымдалады. Ашықтық туралы ресми мәлімдемелерге қарамастан, 2022 жылғы референдуммен салыстыру және бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының жарияланымдары дауыс берудің сенімділігіне күмән тудырады.

Осыған орай, сапалық зерттеу әдісі Қазақстандағы ядролық референдумға қатысты жаңа қоғамдық таралықтардың, соның ішінде мемлекеттік және тәуелсіз бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарындағы тақырыптардың медиа-контентін талдауды қамтыды. Жиі кездесетін тақырыптар, ресми наративтер мен қоғамдық дискурс арасындағы алшактықтарды анықтау үшін Taguette бағдарламасы арқылы тақырыптық және фреймдік талдау жүргізілді. Талдау нәтижелері мемлекеттік бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының атом электр станциясының (АЭС) елдің экономикалық, әлеуметтік және экологиялық дамуына тигізетін пайдасын белсенді түрде насиҳаттағанын, ал тәуелсіз медиа референдум алдындағы қоғамдық пікірталаста мемлекеттік наративтерге қарсы уәждерге басымдық бергенін көрсетті. Жалпы алғанда, 2024 жылғы референдум үкіметтің ядролық саясатты заңдастыру үшін қоғамдық қатысуды қалай пайдаланатынын және шынайы демократиялық үдерістерді шектейтінін айқындейды. Мемлекеттік бақылаудағы және тәуелсіз ақпарат агенттіктерінің сапалық медиа-талдауы референдумның ашықтығы мен оның артындағы уәждерді бағалау үшін қолданылды.

Кілт сөздер: ядролық референдум, медиа талдау, Қазақстан, шоғырланған авторитаризм, АЭС.

МРНТИ: 19.45.91

Понимание динамики ядерного референдума в Казахстане

Сабирова Жанель

Джорджтаунский университет, Вашингтон, округ Колумбия, США

email: zs359@georgetown.edu

Аннотация

В контексте изучения мотивов проведения неконституционных референдумов Казахстан вносит вклад в данную дискуссию своим последним ядерным референдумом, состоявшимся в октябре 2024 года. В статье утверждается, что ядерный референдум в Казахстане отражает национальные факторы, укоренённые в ядерной памяти страны, а также внутреннюю политическую динамику, включая государственный контроль над общественным мнением и соображения безопасности. Несмотря на официальные заявления о прозрачности, сравнение с референдумом 2022 года и анализ медиапубликаций ставят под сомнение достоверность голосования.

В связи с этим в рамках качественного исследовательского подхода был проведён анализ медиапокрытия новостей о ядерном референдуме, включая заголовки государственных и независимых средств массовой информации Казахстана. Тематический и фрейминговый анализ с использованием

программного обеспечения Taguette позволил выявить повторяющиеся темы и расхождения между официальными нарративами и общественным дискурсом. Результаты анализа показали, что государственные СМИ активно продвигали аргументы о пользе атомной электростанции (АЭС) для экономического, социального и экологического развития страны, тогда как независимые медиа в значительной степени сосредоточивались на критике официальной позиции и представлении контраргументов в ходе предреферендумных общественных дебатов. В целом референдум 2024 года демонстрирует, каким образом государство использует контролируемое участие для легитимации ядерной политики, одновременно ограничивая подлинные демократические процессы. Качественный анализ материалов государственных и независимых информационных агентств Казахстана был использован для оценки прозрачности и мотивов проведения референдума.

Ключевые слова: ядерный референдум, медиаанализ, Казахстан, консолидированный авторитаризм, АЭС.