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RESEARCH ARTICLE



'Listening State?': exploring citizens' perceptions of Open Government in Tokayev's Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT

The Open Government reform has been actively adopted across various non-democratic regimes, including post-Soviet Central Asia. The reform is supposed to bolster responsiveness and transparency through the active use of information communication technologies, and numerous authoritarian countries have recently adopted and deepened the Open Government reform. In this work, we study whether Open Government reform contributes to responsiveness in autocracies using the case of Kazakhstan under Tokayev's rule (2019–present). We investigate the concept of the 'Listening State' recently adopted in Kazakhstan through the analysis of novel primary data. The perceptions of ordinary citizens reveal that the Open Government reform in the country has not led to the realization of its key goal of increased responsiveness. Therefore, we argue that the Open Government reform has serious limitations in achieving its ultimate goal of a better listening state to people's needs in autocracies.

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Introduction

The January 2022, riots in Kazakhstan revealed mass citizens' discontent with the political and economic system in the country. The second Kazakh president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, quickly blamed the organized conspirators, criminal groups and terrorists for the violent protests that left more than 200 people dead (Kolosovskaya 2022). However, (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022) noted that protests revealed ordinary citizens' discontent with the political system, economic situation and quality of public services. Kazakhstan, in the previous years, has ostensibly embraced the Western democratic reform of Open Government aimed at increasing responsiveness to citizens based on the widescale adoption of information communication technologies, the creation of one-stop shops (Janenova and Kim 2016), and the establishment of digital channels for citizen participation and empowerment (Kurmanov and Knox 2022). In 2019, Tokayev announced a series of Open Government reforms called the 'Listening State' (*Slyshashcheye gosudarstvo*) that were supposed to increase the responsiveness of

state apparatus to ordinary people and promote citizen participation. Did the Open Government reforms fail to deliver their outcomes?

The adoption of Western-influenced democratic reforms aimed at increasing responsiveness and openness across the authoritarian world has generated discussion among scholars. It seems counterintuitive that an autocracy that lacks a democratic accountability mechanism would deliberately choose to respond to citizens' preferences. One explanation of this phenomenon is that autocracies seek to ensure their long-term survival in an unpredictable world where domestic pressures for change are rising amidst the external influence of the growth of technologies and information. Several scholars discovered how the growth of social media and the Internet had shattered the stability of autocratic regimes in the Middle East (Arafa and Armstrong 2016) and Ukraine (Onuch 2015). Hence, autocratic regimes aim to implement a legitimation strategy (Gerschewski 2018) that would make them stable during fragile transition stages (Silvan 2022). The democratic reforms aimed at increasing responsiveness in the non-democratic regimes can thus enhance the performance of authoritarian regimes to improve their long-term resilience. Hence, the appearance of a democratic facade (Soest and Grauvogel 2017) is an essential factor of legitimacy-building for autocratic regimes.

The introduction of Open Government reform can achieve both the democratic imitation and performance-based legitimation goals of autocracies. Open Government has long been promoted as a tool for development and political modernization (Altayar 2018; Linde and Karlsson 2013). It has been implemented widely across authoritarian and democratic regimes with the promises of bringing more transparency (Ruijter and Meijer 2020), participation of citizens (Evans and Campos 2013), accountability (Foley and Alfonso 2009) as well as the increased overall effectiveness of public sector apparatus (Ingrams 2017). The key desired outcome of the Open Government reform is that states become more responsive and improve the provision of public services. Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999, 9) characterize a government as responsive if it 'adopts policies that are signaled as preferred by citizens'.

However, critics note that the open government reform has been adopted by modern 'informational autocracies' (Guriev and Treisman 2019) to disseminate government propaganda over the Internet and social media that in turn achieve autocratic stability (Gunitsky 2015). Based on the experience of political transformation in the Arab countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholars identified the phenomenon of authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007; Vollmann et al. 2022) that accounted for the reconfiguration of authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage the political and economic changes. Authoritarian regimes could, thus, adopt and absorb democratic reforms while being able to upgrade and deepen their autocratic rule.

Though it is logical that authoritarian regimes can use Open Government reform to imitate political reforms, its impact on bureaucratic responsiveness to citizens has not been explored well. As Grossman and Slough (2022) demonstrate, there is a gap in the literature exploring the relationship between the responsiveness reforms and their impact on citizens' access to public services. How does the Open Government reform affect the responsiveness of state apparatus to citizens' needs in autocracies? This paper aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of Open Government reform on the responsiveness of state apparatus to ordinary people in autocracies.

In this research, we argue that the Open Government reform in Kazakhstan implemented by Tokayev has had limited impact on the actual responsiveness of state officials to ordinary citizens. To support this claim, we present the analysis based on the qualitative (five focus groups) and descriptive quantitative (N-1200) analysis of citizens' perception regarding the Open Government reform effectiveness and explore the interactions of Kazakh citizens with state officials. First, the survey results indicate the unsatisfactory level of citizens' understanding of the 'Listening State' concept, the low level of participation in digital services provided by Open Government and a lack of state responsiveness. Second, the focus groups that concentrated on low- and middle-income citizens uncover the issues with access to digital services and discontent with the delivery of public services. We show how the authoritarian regime in Kazakhstan has failed to increase the responsiveness of state officials to ordinary citizens despite the alleged availability of political will. This article supports the findings of Grossman and Slough (2022) that Open Government reforms in autocracies aim at providing more information and improving the monitoring system of citizens' complaints and appeals, in practice, do not result in increased responsiveness for low-income groups of citizens.

In the next section, we identify the concept of Open Government, followed by a review of the literature on the potential of Open Government for increased responsiveness. We then offer a background on Open Government Reform in Kazakhstan and explain our methodological approach. Afterward, we discuss the findings from our primary data: survey and focus groups. Finally, we present our findings based on results that emerge from the research, and consider wider implications of state apparatus responsiveness to ordinary citizens in autocracies.

Open Government and responsiveness in autocracies

The Open Government concept refers to the process of state bodies becoming more responsive to the needs of citizens through the active use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Gil-Garcia, Dawes, and Pardo 2018; Kurmanov and Knox 2022). Open Government was initially conceived on the provision of public sector information to citizens; however, with time, the concept evolved into a progressive model that starts with open data and proceeds through open participation to collaborative governance (Wirtz and Birkmeyer 2015). Open Government can be perceived as an extension of e-government reform, where technology is used to share information on policies or laws, leading to the broader notion of deliberative and democratic governance (Kurmanov and Knox 2022; Wirtz, Weyerer, and Röscher 2019). While the provision of open data is relatively easy to achieve, open participation is more complicated to implement in non-democratic regimes (Astrom et al. 2012). The participation component is realized through the creation of multiple means such as digital and offline channels of communication (Evans and Campos 2013), the introduction of integrated systems of monitoring of citizens' requests, complaints and appeal. Hence, Open Government can become effective only if the state deliberately creates institutional guarantees and practices of openness, participation and citizen activism.

Open Government as an inherently democratic reform (Harrison et al. 2011) can impact institutional power structures by engaging a wide citizenry through participation. Meijer,

Curtin, and Hillebrandt (2012) argue that Open Government is about providing opportunities for citizens to participate in policymaking, engage with state officials, and 'voice' their legitimate needs and concerns. Recent research demonstrates how non-democratic regimes adopt the features of Open Government reform to promote citizen participation. For instance, the increased government presence in social media in Oman (Al-Aufi et al. 2017) and Pakistan (Arshad and Khurram 2020) led to a modest rise in citizen online participation and engagement. However, these studies still indicate the limitations of such reforms in authoritarian settings, where regimes might have other priorities, such as legitimization and social media control (Gunitsky 2015). Schnell (2020) noted that authoritarian states introduced the Open Government reform to selectively enhance 'vision' and 'voice', thus leading to the rise of 'authoritarian openness'. Indeed, achieving comprehensive responsiveness and meaningful participation beyond selected groups of citizens has been problematic, especially among autocracies where the bureaucratic apparatus resisted the poorly understood reform (Safarov 2020).

Nevertheless, Open Government is widely perceived to be fundamental for reforms that aim to increase accountability and responsiveness of state bodies (Foley and Alfonso 2009), reduce corruption (Gil-Garcia, Dawes, and Pardo 2018) and bring innovations to public service (Schillemans, Twist, and Vanhommerig 2013). Numerous autocracies have adopted Open Government reforms aimed to achieve increased responsiveness of state apparatus to citizens (Astrom et al. 2012). However, some scholars have questioned whether such reforms produce increased accountability, responsiveness and openness in autocracies (Kalathil and Boas 2003; Kurmanov and Knox 2022; Wirtz and Birkmeyer 2015).

Another strand of the literature argued that the autocratic states used the imitation of Western democratic reforms to oppress and manipulate citizens (Guriev and Treisman 2019), and to achieve regime legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018). In such systems, the authoritarian regime would remain in full power while allowing for a wide range of conversations online. Hence, Open Government reform may serve to achieve performance-based (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2018) legitimation that is crucial for a non-democratic regime in persuading its citizens of the autocracy's worth and indispensability by delivering essential public services (Cassani 2017), and appearing allegedly responsive to citizens' preferences. However, the establishment of monitoring systems and participation channels of Open Government can have limited impact on improving the actual responsiveness of the state to its citizens.

The existing research shows that the Open Government reform adoption has a rather mixed impact on state apparatus responsiveness to citizens in autocracies. Several scholars underlined possible obstacles that the Open Government reform may face in increasing state responsiveness. Slough (2021) noted that the provision of information (citizens' complaints) had a negative impact on the provision of public services to low-income groups and the otherwise disadvantaged citizens. In this scenario, bureaucrats can provide reduced information to such groups to avoid dealing with the problems of public service provision (Slough 2021). Such monitoring system reduced the state's capacity in providing public services to disadvantaged citizens who would never complain. This, in turn, limits the penetration of such reforms only to the privileged groups in society who have access to the Internet and possess digital skills. Several studies that looked at how the establishment of monitoring systems came up with inconclusive results showing

that citizens had low efficacy in using such systems to report complaints and problems with public services (Cilliers, Mbiti, and Zeitlin 2021; Lieberman and Zhou 2022).

The recent literature uncovered how autocracies adopt new technologies, e-participation and e-government to focus on the goals of economic growth and public sector modernization (Altayar 2018; Linde and Karlsson 2013). Barma, Ratner, and Spector (2009, 1), in their work on open authoritarian regimes, found that such governments focused on delivering economic growth, and ‘plugging into the international system in ways that allow[ed] them to benefit from global connectivity while retaining their grip on domestic power’. The final objective of prioritizing technologies and digitalization is to harmonize the country with modern global reforms and, therefore, to attract investments (Kalathil and Boas 2003). Hence, autocracies may be willing to adopt the Open Government reform to achieve economic reforms and to pursue policies that would promote their legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018) with the goal of authoritarian upgrading.

Authoritarian upgrading essentially means the reconfiguration of governance and the use of specific regimes strategies to deal with external or internal pressure for democratic change and liberalization. Several studies showed how the authoritarian regimes of Bahrain (Moore-Gilbert and Abdul-Nabi 2021), Morocco and Algeria (Vollmann et al. 2022) used authoritarian upgrading in dealing with domestic pressures for change. The critical implication is that the authoritarian regimes need to comply with particular societal demands and implement minor reforms. As a result, the non-democratic regimes embark on shallow liberalization to achieve three main goals: to satisfy and control the civil society, to manage the opposition and other relevant elites, and to extract potential economic benefits of selective reforms (Vollmann et al. 2022).

Several studies looked at the Open Government introduction in the Central Asian region arguing that the autocratic regimes implemented various digital government reforms mainly to pursue legitimization (Maerz 2016). However, while the authoritarian leaders in the region pledge to adopt e-government and Open Government, their middle-level officials and bureaucrats resist its essential premise of being more accountable and transparent to citizens (O’Connor, Janenova, and Knox 2019). Knox and Janenova (2019), for example, demonstrate that post-Soviet countries’ e-government development resulted in limited citizen engagement. Furthermore, recent studies found that state-induced initiatives such as public councils (Knox and Janenova 2018) and the national council of society trust (Schiek 2022) did not facilitate citizen participation. Kurmanov and Knox (2022) demonstrate that rather than leading to participation and collaboration with citizens the Open Government reform is used for sinister purposes of co-optation and regime survival in Central Asia.

However, most studies on Open Government in the Central Asian region concentrate on answering their research question from the viewpoint of state officials or citizen activists. There still needs to be more understanding of how Open Government reform is perceived and experienced by ordinary people in Central Asia. Current scholarship has not investigated the impact of Open Government on the responsiveness of state officials to its citizens. Based on the conducted literature review, this study seeks to fill the gap in understanding how the Open Government reform impacts the responsiveness of state bodies to ordinary citizens. Specifically, we seek to investigate the experiences of lower- and middle-income citizens who could encounter substantial obstacles in accessing public services. For that purpose, this study aims to answer the following questions:

RQ1. How has the Open Government reform affected the responsiveness of state officials to citizens in Kazakhstan?

RQ2. What are the perceptions of Kazakhstani citizens regarding the effectiveness of the Open Government reform adopted by Tokayev?

Empirically, we analyse the case of Kazakhstan, and the adoption of the 'Listening State' reform in the country initiated by the country's second president, Tokayev. The next section presents the background on Open Government in Kazakhstan.

Open Government in Kazakhstan: from electronic government to 'Listening State'

Kazakhstan's experience with the adoption and implementation of Open Government could be divided into two main historical stages: (1) one-stop shops, e-government and attempts to foster transparency, participation and access to information by Nazarbayev during the period 2007–15; and (2) transition to increased responsiveness facilitated by the 'Listening State' reform introduced by Tokayev in 2019.

The Kazakh government proceeded with numerous public sector reforms in the 2000s based on the introduction of leading international 'best practices' that followed the advice of international donors (Knox 2008). The one-stop shops that provided integrated public services to citizens were first introduced in 2007, and the reform was widely welcomed across the country as an important step in the reduction of bureaucracy and improving public service, even though it did not improve the responsiveness of state bodies to citizens in such areas as education and healthcare (Janenova and Kim 2016). In 2007, the Kazakh Parliament adopted the law on citizen appeals, which allowed the acceptance of citizen complaints and requests through online websites and video calls. The monitoring system started to develop sporadically from 2007 to 2019 as separate state bodies and agencies initiated various digital and offline monitoring platforms. This focus on the application of digital technologies has permeated the following e-government and Open Government reforms in Kazakhstan, corresponding with the global trend of 'authoritarian openness' (Schnell 2020).

Around this time, in 2008, the Kazakh government invested significant resources in creating its e-government web portal Egov.kz (e-government). Starting as a platform for online provision of public services, Egov.kz transformed into the main open data government portal, providing legislation and budgets for citizens' view and comments, while also accepting citizen complaints. The Egov.kz platforms received significant criticism from users and scholars, and state bodies proved reluctant to provide valuable information to the public (Knox and Janenova 2019; O'Connor, Janenova, and Knox 2019). Maerz (2016) has argued that the development of Egov.kz should not be mistaken for a sign of democratization but rather recognized as the Kazakh regime's attempt to increase the support from its population. Therefore, the Kazakh government introduced the e-government and the subsequent public sector digitalization largely to enhance bureaucratic performance and gain internal legitimacy.

The Kazakhstan's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev's strategic modernization agenda to join the top 30 developed countries by 2050 required the government to adhere to policy reforms in line with global international practices such as the Open Government.

In 2015, the Kazakh government announced the reform package ‘100 Concrete Steps’ with the goal of ‘establishing an accountable state’ (Idrisov 2015). The law ‘On Access to Information’ was enacted to provide citizens and journalists with access to government bodies’ information, except for confidential state documents (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2015). However, O’Connor, Janenova, and Knox (2019) found that the law on access to information and the broader Open Government initiatives in the country did not provide the necessary boost for the government’s transparency and responsiveness due to bureaucratic resistance. The Kazakh government established public councils in 2015 to ‘strengthen democracy’ and the quality and responsiveness of public policies through the public expression of matters of concern to Kazakh citizens. Knox and Janenova (2018) argued that the impact of public councils tended to be personality dependent and less effective in encouraging citizen participation and responsiveness.

The final stage of Open Government implementation in Kazakhstan began in the period 2018–19 with the initiation of political transition as Nazarbayev abruptly stepped down in March 2019, paving the way for Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to take power. During this period, the urban middle-class protest movement (known as ‘hipsters’) started mobilizing in Almaty, and it was responsible for increased protest activity (Isaacs 2023). The victory of Tokayev in the presidential campaign in June 2019 resulted in mass protests that were brutally suppressed by the police. Eventually, the riots of January 2022 culminated in the protest activity of wider groups of discontented citizens (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022). These and other public protest incidents were fuelled by citizen online activism and citizens’ dissatisfaction with the quality of public services and the work of the government.

Tokayev, as the newly elected president, unveiled the new political reforms in 2019 aimed at adopting the Open Government reform – The ‘Listening State’ concept. The reforms were introduced to counter increased domestic pressures for change caused by the process of political transition in the country. Tokayev attempted to target both urban middle-class and the wider populace as his reform emphasized the widened participation of citizens in policy formulation, as well as the increased responsiveness of state officials. Hence, the second president attempted to use the ‘Listening State’ to build his legitimacy (Dukalskis and Gerschewski 2018) based on improving the performance of the state apparatus, which was supposed to become distinctively better under his rule. In his State of the Union address in September 2019, Tokayev explained:

Our task is to bring to life the concept of the ‘Listening State’, which promptly and effectively responds to all constructive requests from citizens. A harmonious state can be built only through constant dialogue between the authorities and society. (Tokayev 2019)

Three major initiatives were supposed to make the ‘Listening State’ concept different from Nazarbayev’s policies. First, the Kazakh state officials, from police to local state bodies, were strongly encouraged to open up Instagram, Facebook, Telegram and other communication channels with citizens. Certainly, this sort of social media monitoring favoured responding to the needs of digitally active citizens based in Almaty and other cities. This social media activism was directed primarily at the grievances of urban middle-class citizens, such as, for example, the president’s decision to stop the Kok Zhailau resort construction to preserve the natural park (Alkhabayev and Azhigaliyev 2019). The state bureaucrats were instructed to contact ordinary citizens directly to instil their participation in policy design and public services.

Second, Tokayev has continued with the digitalization of the monitoring system of citizens' appeals and complaints. The 'Listening State' was supposed to increase the responsiveness of state bodies to the whole population by significantly expanding the monitoring system and providing Open Government information to citizens. In 2019–20 the Kazakh government created the unified online (*E-Otinish*) and offline (*E-Natizhe*) systems to integrate fragmented virtual receptions of government websites to facilitate citizens in sending their complaints on the performance of state bodies. In 2021 a new administrative code was adopted that further strengthened the responsibility of state bodies to respond to citizens' complaints and appeals. The streamlined work of digital platforms was intended to increase citizens' participation and enhance state responsiveness to the needs of broader society.

Third, Tokayev created the National Council of Public Trust to achieve increased collaboration with leading social activists, experts and elites. Schiek (2022) argued that Kazakhstan's National Council was established to promote a consultative ideology, which advocated for state-organized dialogue between citizens and the government. The key goal was to depoliticize requests for democratization and civil society participation. Kurmanov and Knox (2022) reveal that the National Council of Public Trust has become a tool for co-optation and mobilization of elites to promote and disseminate government message. In spring 2022, the National Council of Public Trust was hastily replaced by a new consultative-advisory body called 'National Qurultay' (the term that referred to a 'traditional gathering of elderly respected members of society' in Kazakh society).

This background section indicates three major points. First, the Kazakh government under Nazarbayev has made significant investments and progress with the development of e-government infrastructure and the digitalization of public services. Second, the transformation from e-government to Open Government reform was launched by Nazarbayev, but it was significantly promoted under the Second President Tokayev. Third, Tokayev implemented the 'Listening State' concept as the Open Government reform that focused on state established digital participation platforms (*E-Otinish/E-Natizhe*) and depoliticized consultative councils, indicating continuity with the Nazarbayev's reforms.

The next section justifies the case selection and the chosen methodology.

Methodology

In this study, we analyse the effectiveness of Open Government reform in Kazakhstan using quantitative and qualitative methods. To answer our questions, we adopted causal and descriptive inferences, widely used in similar research on Kazakhstan (Akhmetzharov and Orazgaliyev 2022). First, we rely on a nationwide survey to generate descriptive inferences to capture citizens' perspectives on their interaction with Open Government through the 'Listening State' reform introduced by President Tokayev. Second, we ran focus groups with ordinary citizens, which allowed us to explore in-depth the everyday encounters of ordinary citizens with the state.

We have chosen the case of Kazakhstan to explore the Open Government reform and responsiveness for several reasons. First, Kazakhstan has been one of the leaders in adopting e-government and a broader Open Government in the Central Asian region. The country has made tremendous progress in e-government and e-participation index (compiled by UN 2022), while remaining a hard-line autocracy (Table 1). Second, Kazakhstan as

Table 1. Kazakhstan's e-participation and e-government index (UN 2022).

	Rank in 2003 (from 193 countries)	Rank in 2022 (from 193 countries)	Change between 2003 and 2022
E-government	83	28	+55
E-participation	69	15	+54

a 'hard-line autocracy' with limited development of political participation (BTI 2023) has experienced significant pressure to adopt a wider democratization reform in recent years (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022). Third, the second President Tokayev emphasized the implementation of the 'Listening State' concept as one of the most critical reforms of his rule. Various civil society and business leaders welcomed the reform pointing out the existing problems with the unresponsiveness of the state apparatus and placing hopes in the reform's ability to address them (Tengrinews 2020). Kazakhstan presents a unique case of an authoritarian country under political transition, where Tokayev announced the 'Listening State' as the Open Government reform that aimed at increasing the responsiveness of state officials to the needs of ordinary citizens.

We relied on the survey of citizens since it can serve as the efficient instruments to convey the information about human behaviour (Singleton and Straits 2009). We used survey data collected by the Eurasian Integration Institute (EII),¹ an Astana-based think tank that conducts research on the Kazakhstan's political and economic issues. The survey was conducted in August 2021 and consisted of 11 parts and 58 questions. The survey sample size was 1200 respondents over 18 years old living in rural and urban areas, and it used a multistage stratified territorial quota sample (see the supplemental data online). The sample is representative in terms of the parameters: region, place of residence, gender, age and ethnicity, which are close to the corresponding proportions of the socio-demographic composition of the population over 18 years old at the beginning of 2018. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in each region's regional centres and several district centres.

To explore the everyday encounters of Kazakh citizens with the state, we chose a focus group method, defined as when a group of people of similar characteristics is held to explore in-depth questions focused on a particular set of issues (Cyr 2016, 233). Focus groups as a technique allow the construction of meaning negotiated by participants in their interactions, which helps better understand individuals' motivations, attitudes and beliefs (Morgan 2012). We conducted five focus groups from 8 to 20 July 2022, in the urban and rural centres across Kazakhstan in Nur-Sultan (Astana), Dubovka, Zhanaozen, Ryskulova and Oskemen (Table 2) that ensured regional representation. The focus groups were conducted in Russian and Kazakh languages, and the moderators were fully bilingual. In Nur-Sultan (Astana), Zhanaozen and Ryskulova, the moderator engaged participants primarily in the Kazakh language, while in Dubovka and

Table 2. Conducted focus groups.

Location	Urban/rural	Region	Date	Number of participants	Duration (h)
Nur-Sultan (Astana)	Urban	Capital	8 July 2022	8	2
Dubovka	Rural	Central Kazakhstan	10 July 2022	10	2
Zhanaozen	Urban	Western Kazakhstan	13 July 2022	8	1.5
Ryskulova	Rural	Southern Kazakhstan	15 July 2022	9	2
Oskemen	Urban	Eastern Kazakhstan	20 July 2022	8	2.5

Oskemen, the Russian language was used mostly. The participants could freely choose to converse in any of the two languages during the focus group discussions. The number of participants in each focus group was eight to 11 people who shared basic social characteristics. We recruited groups by sex and income (economic class), focusing on lower- and middle-income citizens. In cities, participants were recruited in less prosperous areas (bazaars, markets, summer cottages, city outskirts, mosques, etc.). At the same time, age and gender balance were observed in the recruitment of focus group participants. A typical composition of our focus group is provided in the supplemental data online.

In the focus groups, we applied the following procedure. After an initial introduction, the moderator asked seven questions about citizens' interaction with state bodies and public services (see the supplemental data online). The open-ended questions were asked to generate discussion among participants. Conversations in the focus groups were recorded on audio equipment (dictaphone) to facilitate subsequent transcription and data analysis. All focus group participants provided informed consent, an approach consistent with the scholarly research on Open Government (Altayar 2018; Morgan 2012). The moderator was accompanied by one of the researchers to observe the conversation. The average duration of the focus group conversation was 120 min. We analysed the focus groups' data using both deductive (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2019) and inductive (Braun and Clarke 2006) thematic analysis approaches. Thematic analysis is useful for qualitative data analysis as it distils primary data to produce verified conclusions (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana 2019). All transcripts were initially coded, and each researcher cross-checked the coding process to improve intercoder reliability. All codes were transformed into categories that led to the emergence of four themes discussed later. NVivo 12 was used in the process of coding data and analysis.

Finally, addressing the methodological challenges of conducting this research in Kazakhstan is essential. Janenova (2019, 2) noted the hurdles of doing politically sensitive research in Kazakhstan, a country that 'experienced many cases of persecution and oppression of journalists, activists, lawyers, and leaders of nongovernmental organizations'. Collins, Sharplin, and Burkhanov (2023, 7–10) discussed the challenges for researchers in conducting objective research in autocracies, where the state intends to control the message and 'informants may be very slow to offer truthful accounts'. We have resolved these challenges in two significant ways. First, the survey was conducted by the EII, an organization that has a strong research reputation in Kazakhstan that minimized potential pressure from the state. Second, following the January events, Tokayev announced his 'New Kazakhstan' programme (Kurmanov 2022) that, though cautiously, encouraged citizens to discuss and contribute to policymaking. We contend that the aftermath of the January 2022 events empowered focus group participants to be more vocal about their issues and grievances with the state.

The next section investigates how the last stage of Open Government reform, known as the 'Listening State', affected ordinary citizens of Kazakhstan.

Survey results: perceptions of state responsiveness to citizens

We use the survey results that focused on the realization of the 'Listening State' as the Open Government reform stage introduced by Tokayev. The survey results show that half of the respondents have some understanding of the concept of the 'Listening State'. However,

Table 3. Are you aware of the concept of the 'Listening State' in Kazakhstan? (% out of all respondents).

	Yes, I am fully aware	I heard something, but do not know well	First time I hear about this concept
Total	10%	40%	50%
<i>By age groups (years)</i>			
18–29	7.1%	40.9%	51.9%
30–45	9.7%	44.1%	46.2%
46–60	12.7%	38.4%	48.9%
61+	11.6%	30.2%	58.1%
<i>By income status</i>			
High income	16.3%	40.8%	42.9%
Middle income	8.3%	41.0%	50.7%
Low income	6.6%	37.6%	55.8%

only 10% of the respondents claim to be familiar with this concept, and 40% of the respondents have heard something but have yet to learn of the concept (Table 3). Interestingly, the data show that the least well-informed category is the low-income category – this is the group of respondents who characterize their financial situation as 'there is enough money for food, but buying clothes causes difficulty' and 'there is not enough money even for food'. In this group, only 6.6% are well informed and 55.8% hear for the first time about the 'Listening State'. This result demonstrates that the Kazakh government has not effectively disseminated the concept to the wider populace, specifically low-income citizens.

The survey asked those citizens who replied that they were fully aware or had heard something about the concept to clarify how they perceived it. A total of 31.1% of citizens noted that they understood the 'Listening State' reform implementation as the President of Kazakhstan responding to citizens on social media (i.e., President Tokayev responding on his Twitter account). A total of 24.5% believed that the adoption of the 'Listening State' meant that government officials should reply on their official government blogs and social media to citizen requests, and 20.7% stated that the concept realization happened when heads of regions (*akims*) opened accounts on social media and reacted to citizens' complaints. However, only 15.1% of the respondents associated the 'Listening State' with the effectiveness of the monitoring system of citizens' appeals and complaints (*E-Otinish* and *E-Natizhe*).

According to the survey, respondents note a slow realization of the key principles of the 'Listening State' in Kazakhstan. First, this concerns the fact that officials have become more attentive to the problems of society (it is being implemented in the opinion of 51.7%); state bodies began to promptly respond to the needs of the population (51.5%), pluralism of opinions (46%). In addition, 45% agree that officials at various levels have become more accessible and open to the public (through social networks, etc.). As shown in Table 4, 46.5% of citizens claim that a high-quality consideration of citizens' requests and appeals is not implemented.

Overall, this section demonstrates that the 'Listening State' concept is not well known among the general populace. Furthermore, citizens note that its principles are not fully implemented, which reveals the isomorphic mimicry side of the reform. Respondents reveal that generally their preferences and voices are not 'heard' by the state.

Respondents were also asked if they knew that they could send their appeals and complaints through the monitoring platform of *E-Otinish* and *E-Natizhe*. Every second at the time of the survey had yet to hear about the work of the platform (Table 5). A total of 44.5% have information about the platform, of which only 11.8% report a complete understanding.

Table 4. In your opinion, what principles of the 'Listening State' concept are being implemented or not being implemented today? (% out of all respondents).

	Implemented	Not Implemented	Do not know
State officials started to hear about citizens' problems	51.7%	33.9%	14.4%
State bodies began to respond quickly to the needs of the population	51.5%	35.1%	13.4%
Officials at various levels have become more accessible and open to the public (through social networks, etc.)	45.0%	39.6%	15.4%
Government policy started to reflect citizens' needs	43.0%	42.4%	14.6%
A strong civil society is involved in the discussion of government policy in order to solve them	42.5%	43.4%	14.1%
I am sure that my preferences and needs will be heard by the government authorities	41.9%	44.7%	13.4%
High-quality consideration by state bodies of citizens' appeals and requests	34.6%	46.5%	18.9%

Awareness scores are pretty low in all groups, regardless of characteristics. This demonstrates that the knowledge about the monitoring system has yet to be disseminated widely, with the lowest awareness levels recorded among older and low-income citizens.

Finally, the survey results show that respondents have little faith in the responsiveness of state bodies both at the central and local levels (Table 6). Only 42.5% believe that the central state authorities pay attention to citizens' appeals. Respondents show approximately the same attitude regarding the reaction of regional authorities: 41.3% believe that they pay attention to citizens' appeals. Strikingly, the majority of citizens do not believe that the state responds to their requests.

Did the state bodies become more actively responsive to citizens' needs? This question has been asked, and the respondents noted that local state officials need to properly contact them to address problems (Table 7).

The next section explores the interactions of ordinary citizens with state officials in depth through focus groups.

Focus group findings: What do people think about the 'Listening State' and the responsiveness of public officials?

Our focus groups showed that citizens hold highly negative perceptions and opinions regarding the realization of the 'Listening State' concept and the state of quality of public services. Most participants expressed their dissatisfaction with government

Table 5. Do you know that you can send appeals and complaints through the *E-Otinish* and *E-Natizhe* platforms (% out of all respondents).

	Yes, I know	Yes, I heard something, but I do not know well how to use it	No, First time I hear about this
<i>Total</i>	11.8%	32.7%	57.8%
<i>By age group (years)</i>			
18–29	12.0%	31.8%	56.2%
30–45	15.8%	35.6%	48.6%
46–60	9.9%	32.7%	57.4%
61+	4.7%	26.7%	68.6%
<i>By income status</i>			
High-income	17.5%	33.5%	48.9%
Middle-income	8.8%	36.2%	55.0%
Low-income	11.7%	25.9%	62.4%

responsiveness and the provision of public services. Using NVivo 12, we conducted thematic analysis and generated four major themes that underline citizens' experience with government (Figure 1 and Table 8).

First, respondents noted the low level of responsiveness by state bodies, specifically in the areas such as access to education, healthcare, economic opportunities and provision of security/safety. Citizens in all focus groups highlighted their dissatisfaction with their everyday interactions with state officials. One respondent noted that the 'state does not listen to citizens' needs and is interested only in supporting oligarchs' (Focus Group in Oskemen, 20 July 2022). Focus group participants noted that state officials do not engage and interact with ordinary citizens. Citizens do not feel that state officials at the central and local levels are accountable to them. One respondent noted that 'politicians do not want to listen to people; they do what they see fit just for themselves' (Focus Group in Nur-Sultan, 8 July 2022). Another participant noted:

In order to serve the people, the Government must, first of all, carry out an honest service to the ordinary people. Because, right now, certain promises are given to people, and then a lot of money is stolen. (Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15 July 2022)

Focus group participants revealed their discontent with the quality of the provision of public services in such areas as healthcare, education, and security. Stories of corruption and low level of accountability of police officers were told. One focus group participant stated that an influential local person killed his friend, and the police and prosecutor's office did not initiate a proper criminal investigation (Focus Group in Dubovka, 10 July 2022). Respondents complained about the lack of good quality healthcare (including patient care and infrastructure) and that they had to rely on private clinics. Similarly, people expressed frustration with access and quality of education services available to citizens.

Second, respondents expressed frustration with the general provision of public services and the high level of corruption. Despite the promises of the 'Listening State', citizens experienced difficulties in accessing public services. Several respondents in different focus groups applied for the popular state programme 'With Diploma to Village', which was supposed to support young graduates to find employment in rural areas. However, as one participant stated, the programme suffered from long queues with a waiting list of up to five years (Focus Group in Oskemen, 20 July 2022). Another respondent was frustrated with the outcome of the employment programme offered by the local municipality:

[...] The akimat [local municipality] sent me [through this program] to Balkash [South of Kazakhstan]. So I came there, and there were awful conditions. In the municipality, they promised me a good job there with three meals a day, a good house, and a decent salary. The reality was so much different. (Focus Group in Dubovka, 10 July 2022)

Table 6. Many citizens, when they have problems, turn to the central state authorities or local municipalities. Do you think that the authorities pay attention to the appeals and requests of citizens? (% of respondents).

	Pay attention	Do not pay attention	Do not know
Central state authorities	42.5%	38.6%	19.0%
Local municipalities	41.3%	39.1%	19.6%

Table 7. Please tell me, over the past 12 months, did the authorities contact the residents or did they not contact the residents to discuss any problems, projects? (% of respondents).

Contacted citizens often	4.8%
Contacted citizens rarely	26.2%
Did not contact	53.4%
Do not know	15.6%

Several other respondents were also unhappy with the provision of services in the area of employment and unemployment benefits:

Well, government agencies do not help people. I enlisted in the register of the unemployed to receive unemployment benefits, I had to go to the social protection department. They did not help; there were a lot of inquiries, and a lot of paperwork from one office to another, but I still need an outcome. (Focus Group in Dubovka, 10 July 2022)

Numerous focus group participants discussed the issue of pervasive corruption that prevents state bodies from being responsive to citizens. One respondent noted that receiving proper help and assistance from state bodies was possible only through bribes (Focus Group in Oskemen, 20 July 2022). Other participants noted that corruption was a major obstacle in state officials responding to citizens’ needs:

Bribes. All that we have done poorly is the result of bribes. ‘Bake’, ‘Sake’, familiarity. [...] Everything is forgiven, guilty remain unpunished, and state officials protect their own people. (Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15 July 2022)

Third, we underlined the general obstacles that citizens face when using digital government infrastructure. The digital divide issues appeared as citizens experienced problems using electronic signatures to access e-government. Residents of rural areas complained

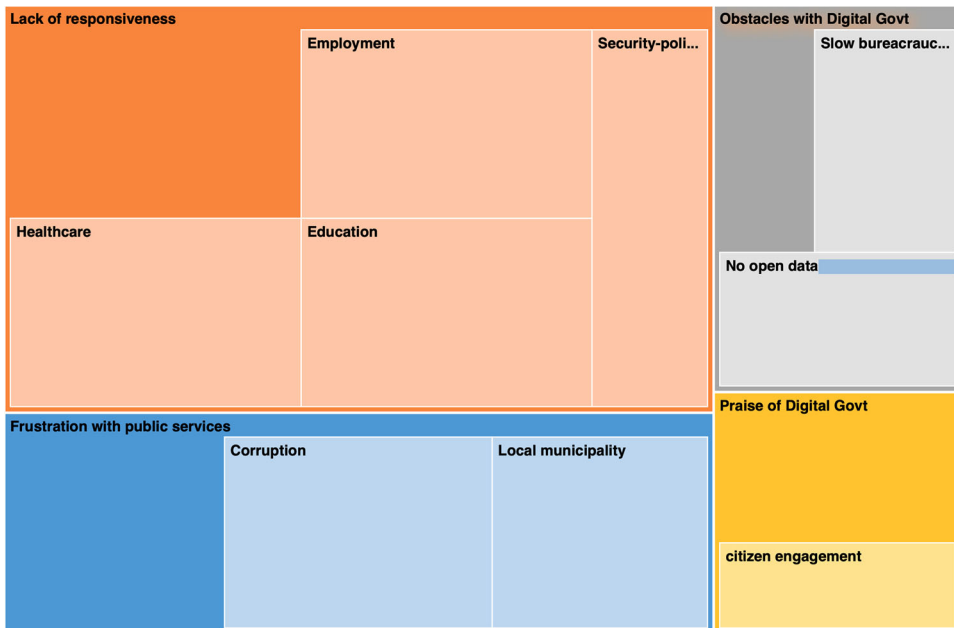


Figure 1. Generated themes from focus group discussions.

Table 8. Frequency of categories and themes.

Theme	Category	Total frequency
Lack of responsiveness	Lack of responsiveness	38
	Security-police	15
	Healthcare	31
	Employment	26
	Education	26
Frustration with public services	Frustration with public services	12
	Local municipalities	6
	Corruption	36
Obstacles with digital government	Obstacles with digital government	8
	Slow bureaucracy	3
	No open data	3
	Praise of digital government	9
Praise of digital government	Praise of digital government	9
	Successful citizen engagement	3

that they needed to learn how to properly use and access digital services. Despite the promises of digitalization of the ‘Listening State’, ordinary people felt left out and frustrated according to our focus groups data.

For some who do not have the Internet or a computer at home, this is, of course, a problem – they have to go to the public service center, stand in line, and wait. (Focus Group in Nur-Sultan, 8 July 2022)

It is necessary for residents of villages like me who do not know how to use these services and applications to explain what it is and how to use it. If there were some kind of help center, free of charge, people would use it. (Focus Group in Ryskulova, 15 July 2022)

Respondents noted the need for more open data and information provided by the state. This indicates a very low level of communication by the government and local municipalities. Participants emphasized that the laws and decisions were written in a formulaic and bureaucratic language that is incomprehensible for understanding (Focus Group in Oskemen, 20 July 2022).

Maybe there are decisions of the Government, akimats [local municipalities], but we don’t know about it; they would not tell us somehow. State bodies don’t tell anything anywhere, and people do not know. The state officials make decisions among themselves, and we do not know anything. (Focus Group in Nur-Sultan, 8 July 2022)

Fourth, several focus group participants praised the work of Digital Government mostly referring to the efficient use of the E-gov.kz portal in providing reference letters (*spravka*). A number of respondents marked the availability of electronic services on the e-government website and the synchronization of several services through a private banking app Kaspi.kz, as well as the medical appointment app *Damumed*:

I contacted the EGOV website and the public service center [one stop shop] once. I didn’t like the service at the one-stop-shop, there were always long queues, and they did not always give correct advice. On EGOV, everything worked without failures. Today you can also get alternative services, and I sold my car through Kaspi; it was convenient and transparent with minimal risks. (Focus Group in Oskemen, 20 July 2022)

Since I am an entrepreneur, I have to deal with the tax department and I have to submit a report online. Of course, I pay through Kaspi, which is very convenient, I also use EGOV and DAMUMED. (Focus Group in Zhanaozen, 13 July 2022)

Discussion

This article reveals that the ‘Listening State’ concept has not realized the proclaimed goals of increased responsiveness of state officials to ordinary citizens. Both survey and focus groups reveal how government officials have not become more proactive in listening to citizens’ needs and preferences. The decreed goals of achieving modernization through improved responsiveness with the Open Government reform in Kazakhstan have produced rather gloomy results. This finding is consistent with the literature on Open Government in autocratic regimes that amplify the importance of a democratic facade (Maerz 2016; Astrom et al. 2012) and achieving legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018) through the imitation of openness and responsiveness reforms. The non-democratic regime in Kazakhstan aims to reap the economic (Kalathil and Boas 2003) and legitimization (Linde and Karlsson 2013) benefits in its superficial implementation of the Open Government reform. Thus, the Open Government reform in Kazakhstan has been adopted to strengthen the democratic credentials of the Kazakh regime and facilitate its authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007; Schnell 2020).

This survey results uncover several points regarding the ‘Listening State’ concept implementation through the eyes of ordinary citizens of Kazakhstan. First, the survey results reveal a low level of awareness about the ‘Listening State’ concept among the wider populace. Kazakhstani citizens report a significantly lower level of trust in state agencies’ capacity to listen and respond to their problems. The results are stronger for elderly and low-income groups of citizens. Second, the survey demonstrates that most citizens are not aware and do not know how to use the integrated monitoring system of complaints and appeals, which seriously limits the effectiveness of the responsiveness initiative. Third, despite the proclaimed objectives of the ‘Listening State’, government officials have not generally become more proactive in engaging citizens to deal with public services and/or policy issues. The results reveal that though some citizens hear about the ‘Listening State’, they do not necessarily use its system to voice their concerns and problems. The Tokayev’s reform, thus, fails to give a proper ‘voice’ (Meijer, Curtin, and Hillebrandt 2012; Schnell 2020) to most of the citizens who feel disenchanting by unresponsive state officials.

The findings from focus groups uncover the lack of responsiveness in everyday interactions between ordinary people and state officials. Analysing the perceptions and experiences of ordinary citizens, we reveal their discontent with the quality of public services in education, healthcare, and security. Citizens noted their limited ability to access digital government (including digital divide and proper skills), lack of open data provision and general frustration with public services provision. Focus group participants underlined corruption as one of the major obstacles preventing the state from becoming truly responsive. Since in focus group recruitment we focused on low-income and middle-income citizens; the results exemplify the issue of responsiveness to such marginalized groups (Grossman and Slough 2022; Slough 2021) in autocracies, where democratic accountability is sometimes lacking (Schnell 2020). Though some focus group participants praised the digital government, it was related to the public services integration with private banks and providers. Overall, the focus groups results reveal that even when citizens take opportunity to voice their frustration with public services, they face the state that is unwilling to respond to citizens’ needs.

Conclusions

To conclude, we should return to our two research questions. How has the Open Government reform impacted responsiveness in Kazakhstan? What are the perceptions of Kazakhstani citizens regarding the effectiveness of the Open Government reform adopted by Tokayev? We demonstrate that the 'Listening State' reform introduced by Tokayev in 2019 did not increase the responsiveness of state officials to ordinary citizens. This work shows that citizens report the low effectiveness of the Open Government reform in Tokayev's Kazakhstan. This finding is supported by both quantitative and qualitative data that we employ in this article.

This study contributes to the literature on the limits of Open Government as a Western democratic reform in autocracies. Notably, we confirm the findings of Cassani (2017) and Kurmanov and Knox (2022) that autocratic regimes cannot encourage citizens' actual participation using a shallow responsiveness channel. This argument is especially valid for low-income and elderly groups of citizens who have little information about public services and government efforts at maintaining a monitoring system of citizens' appeals and complaints, which confirms the works of Slough (2021) on the inequality of service provision. The implementation of Open Government in Kazakhstan is obstructed mainly by corruption (Khamitov, Knox, and Junusbekova 2022) and bureaucratic resistance (O'Connor, Janenova, and Knox 2019; Safarov 2020). The evolving autocratic regime in Kazakhstan has adopted the 'Listening State' reform to pursue a superficial liberalization agenda. This argument is consistent with the previous literature on regime legitimization in Kazakhstan that showed how the ruling regime used information control to maintain resilience (Lewis 2016) and to forge legitimizing discourse (Omeli-cheva 2016).

The Kazakh regime had to neutralize domestic pressure for democratization that was building up for years. Hence, the 'Listening State' reform, through the declarative goals of widened participation of citizens, increased responsiveness of state apparatus, and enlarged collaboration with civil society groups 'upgraded' (Heydemann 2007) the autocratic regime in Kazakhstan during its political transition. The reform served well for the Kazakh regime to build legitimacy (Gerschewski 2018; Soest and Grauvogel 2017) while it is arguably evolving into an informational autocracy under Tokayev's leadership (Guriev and Treisman 2019; Kurmanov and Knox 2022).

This article also shows that Kazakhstan has made significant investment in e-government and Open Government in the country. The new leadership under Tokayev has a promising agenda in delivering effective political and economic reforms that would build New Kazakhstan for all citizens. Though some citizens noted the efficient use of e-government and praised its integration with private sector providers in improved public services delivery, the Kazakh authorities should pay more attention to widening and improving access for digital services to broader population. A note for policy practitioners is to design Open Government reforms in a way that it does not neglect the disadvantaged groups.

It is critical to note the limitations of this study. This work is a single case study based on Kazakhstan's Open Government reform adaptation. Hence, the work's conclusions may apply to other countries with an understanding of the local context. However, the case of Kazakhstan has significant implications for scholarship on government responsiveness

and Open Government in the evolving autocratic regimes. Showing how the Open Government fails to achieve responsiveness and how ordinary citizens are impacted, we contribute to the debate on the promises and perspective of Open Government and, more broadly, Western democratic reforms' adoption in autocratic settings. Further research with an increased sample of countries could bring to light how autocracies adopt Open Government.

Note

1. The Eurasian Integration Institute (EII) is a subsidiary organization of the Committee for Science at the Ministry of Higher Education and Science of Kazakhstan. It was formed on 31 October 2012 by the Kazakhstani Government's Decree No. 1374. The EII is an officially accredited scientific and research centre in Kazakhstan. Its address is 12/1 Kunayev Street, Business Center 'Vodno-Zelenyi Bulvar', 14th floor, Astana City. Contact information: info@iei.kz; +7 (7172) 57 20 30.

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