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Whispers of dissent? Analyzing the rhetorical alignment of the elites with the authoritarian incumbent through parliamentary discourse in the Kazakhstani Senate

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ABSTRACT

Parliaments are often thought to be key arenas of elite signaling in authoritarian regimes. This paper examines the patterns of rhetorical alignment between individual elite members of parliament and the incumbent in a personalistic authoritarian regime using discourse data. I explore the possible determinants of rhetorical alignment, including the elites' regional affiliations, policy discussion topics, leadership transitions, and crises. To measure rhetorical alignment, the paper applies LSS-based cosine similarity analysis to the statements of Kazakhstani senators alongside the incumbent's speeches in 2019–2024. The regression analysis of the variation in rhetorical alignment between the incumbent and the senators suggests that while the 2022 leadership change, the COVID-19 crisis, and regional affiliation are not associated with high levels of alignment, some pockets of rhetorical contestation can be concealed within specific policy topics determined through structural topic modeling. To describe this phenomenon, the paper proposes the concept of "embedded rhetorical contestation." Methodologically, the paper's findings show the value of text-as-data approaches in analyzing parliamentary discourses for a better understanding of authoritarian regime dynamics and elite signaling.

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The comparative politics literature has long established that one of the most dangerous and statistically likely threats to the political stability of authoritarian regimes are possible conflicts between the elites (Frantz 2018; Geddes 2018, chap. 4; Svolik 2012, chap. 1). Both tangible and rhetorical contestation are something that dictators particularly want to avoid as a part of what Svolik describes as the problems of authoritarian control (2012). Therefore, dictators use various sorts of instruments to avoid potential conflicts, ranging from resource redistribution to allocation of positions in formal institutions such as parliaments, ruling party committees, and cabinets (Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik 2020; Geddes 2018; Kelly 2016). Conflicts may happen over both distribution and subsequent control of tangible and non-tangible benefits, while in terms of stakeholder set-up, they

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may include conflicts between the elite factions themselves as well as between the incumbent and the elites.

However, elite contestation in authoritarian regimes is quite often invisible to the general public, as opposed to democracies. Instead, these processes often happen backstage, making it harder to capture – an issue known as the problem of authoritarian opacity (Schedler and Hoffmann 2016, 98). A variety of measurement approaches have been adopted in the literature to analyze elite cohesion vs. elite contestation or, at least, pinpoint the patterns of patronage networks between the incumbent and the elites and/or their clans. Some approaches focus on the distribution of material benefits and resources (Hale 2014; Matti 2010), while others use the data on institutional appointments, such as, for example, the distribution of cabinet seats (Kroeger 2020). There are yet other studies looking at the behavior and role of the individual elite members in the process of legislative development and policymaking. For example, Noble (2020) shows the role of MPs and affiliates of individual ministries in the process of watering down incumbent-mandated legislation in the case of the Russian Federation. Indeed, there is a whole stream of literature on authoritarian legislatures as areas of elite contestation, which illustrates how individual legislators and/or their supporters exert some impact on policymaking even in authoritarian contexts (Krol 2017; Wiebrecht 2021).

While such works investigating tangible elements of elite contestation are more common, less attention is usually paid to the rhetorical or communicative aspects of contestation. These rhetorical patterns, however, can still be an important tool for monitoring the elites' behavior. In their work on communicating authoritarian elite cohesion, Schedler and Hoffmann (2016, 98) indicate that greater elite cohesion can be achieved not only through the ruler's capacity to reward and punish materially but also through making sure that the behavioral elite loyalty is publicly visible. This means that individual elite members have to openly demonstrate their support for the ruler, also through their speeches and public acts. This can be more pronounced in personalistic regimes with stronger cults of personality, such as the Kim dynasty in North Korea, Joseph Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union, or Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping's China. The levels of rhetorical alignment, however, may vary substantively across time and different conditions.

This paper aims to contribute to the elite contestation literature by examining the patterns and determinants of the rhetorical alignment of individual elite members with the incumbent using an authoritarian parliament as a set-up. In the next section, the paper presents the four hypotheses related to how regional/clan – based affiliation, leadership transitions, crises, and policy topics may affect the rhetorical alignment of the elites with the authoritarian incumbent. Methodologically, I test these expectations by applying a combination of text-as-data approaches with observational regression analysis. With this goal in mind, the paper leverages a new dataset covering the statements of Kazakhstani senators between March 2019 and June 2024 and analyzes how closely the statements of individual Kazakhstani senators align with the rhetoric of the (former) authoritarian incumbent, Nursultan Nazarbayev. In some parts of the paper, measuring similarity with the current president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, was also used for cross-referencing the results. Kazakhstan of that period represents a typical case of a personalistic authoritarian regime. Additional details on the case selection and research design are presented in the third section.

The paper's findings in the fourth section suggest that while on the surface authoritarian parliaments may show high levels of rhetorical cohesion with the incumbent, once individual policy topics are taken into consideration, substantial variation is observable. There is much more rhetorical contestation on socio-economic topics, while less so on socio-political topics. I label this phenomenon as "embedded rhetorical contestation,", in line with the existing studies of authoritarian parliaments and elite contestation. In this way, the findings provide useful insights into the deliberative role of legislative institutions in an authoritarian regime's attempts to maintain internal regime cohesion, even at the level of rhetoric, not to mention elites' policy actions. The last section explains the relevance of the study's findings in greater detail and summarizes its limitations with possible avenues for future research.

Theoretical expectations

In their first work on the communication of authoritarian elite cohesion from almost a decade ago, Schedler and Hoffman proposed a conceptual framework to analyze the communicative imperatives of authoritarian regimes (2016, 94). Since then, political scientists have started to pay increasingly more attention to the topic of communication within the regimes as well as authoritarian discourses broadly. There is rich research examining the rhetoric of the incumbents themselves – examinations of the speeches of various dictators are conducted through the prisms of legitimation theories (Omelicheva 2016), critical discourse and ideology (Bayram 2010), and even predictive policy analysis (Drozdova and Robinson 2019). The individual members of elites in authoritarian regimes, in contrast, receive much less attention, even though Schedler and Hoffman (2016, 96–97) specifically stress that both positive and negative communicative affirmations of the incumbent's leadership are important for elite cohesion. This is despite the fact that very robust studies exist analyzing some specific types of elite behavior, such as, for example, legislative voting patterns, corruption, and coalition-building in authoritarian regimes (Carothers 2023; Chaisty and Whitefield 2023; Malesky and Schuler 2010). Some researchers, especially in the field of legislative studies, have made efforts to shed more light on this issue. For example, Chizhik and Sergeyev's (2021) research analyzes the parliamentary discourse in the Russian parliament, while Draege (2021) explores the responses of MPs to the Gezi protests in the Turkish parliament. However, such studies remain very niche and largely pursue descriptive goals. The recent rise of text-as-data approaches, fortunately, creates excellent methodological tools to push the boundaries of the existing literature further and approach the questions of elite-incumbent rhetorical alignment analyses more critically.

Empirically, the rhetorical alignment of the elites with the authoritarian incumbent is not a commonly studied topic, even though it has been a subject of theoretical research interest. Hank Johnston, in his work on speech acts and resistance in authoritarian regimes (2005, 108–111), suggests that distorting and setting up patterns of communication can be an important tool in undermining any potential for mobilization in authoritarian regimes. In this sense, some conceptual specifications are necessary. Rhetorical alignment is a continuous variable, as can be seen in Figure 1, with rhetorical cohesion on one end of the spectrum (a high level of alignment) and rhetorical contestation (a low level of alignment) on the other end of the spectrum. Conceptually, rhetorical cohesion

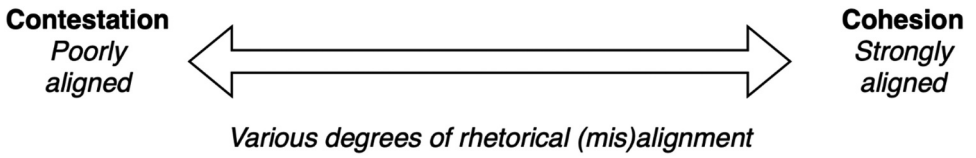

Figure 1. Rhetorical alignment: cohesion vs. contestation. Source: Author's elaboration in Draw.Io.

would imply a high level of the incumbent's words, phrases, rhetorical structures, and themes used by the elites in their statements. Imitating the speeches of the authoritarian incumbent or even directly quoting them would be, in line with Schedler and Hoffmann (2016, 97–99), a public manifestation of loyalty. Empirical illustrations for this largely come from strongly personalistic regimes. For example, North Korean officials under the Kim regime are well known for their strictly formalized public statements, often containing quotes from or references to the speeches made by the governing Kim family members (Cathcart, Green, and Denney 2014, 161). For example, a 2014 study of Medvedev's presidency in Russia by Baturo and Mikhaylov shows how the changes in the rhetoric of the regional elites (governors' legislative addresses) explain how these elites perceived the distribution of power between Putin and Medvedev. As the elites anticipated Putin's return in the 2012 presidential election, policy initiatives advocated by Medvedev between 2008 and 2011 all but evaporated from the rhetoric of the governors by 2012 (Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014). Personalistic regimes aside, the study by C.-H. Shih and Victor (2008) demonstrates that even single-party regimes (e.g. China under Jiang Zemin), public, exaggerated praises may constitute an alternative way for the elites to signal loyalty credibly and deter factional rivals from recruiting the "sycophants" into an alternative coalition.

By contrast, rhetorical contestation refers to a shift away from the narrative as well as rhetorical structures and themes established by the incumbent. While it does not necessarily imply direct or overt criticism of the authoritarian incumbent, theoretically, this lack of alignment can still be perceived as a hostile political action in personalistic authoritarian regimes (Johnston 2005; Schedler and Hoffmann 2016). For example, Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union was known for imposing strict rhetorical demands on the speeches of officials and public figures. Refusing to abide by such demands may have resulted in political pressure and eventual punishment (Vorozhbitova et al. 2020, 224–25). Even without strictly formalized punishments, up until this day, elites in some post-Soviet countries, such as Kazakhstan and Russia, pay very close attention to the annual addresses of the presidents of their respective countries and may attempt to reproduce them in their strategic communication (Baturo and Tolstrup 2024).

What are the possible set-ups in which a difference in rhetoric and discourse may be captured? In democracies, diverging rhetorics and discourses are normal phenomena, which are commonly studied with text-as-data approaches, including dictionary-based techniques. The reason behind this is that public communication patterns in formal institutions are built upon a robust system of political parties, which should be program-based, cohesive, coalesced, and ideologically distinct (Lupu 2015; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016). Naturally, the same cannot be assumed about authoritarian regimes, where dictators might crack down on any form of rhetorical dissent in the public domain.

Still, the studies examining the institutional arenas of elite contestation in authoritarian regimes indicate that parliaments may still be a good avenue to probe for potential rhetorical contestation (Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik 2020). Authoritarian parliaments serve multiple functions beyond mere symbolism, including the co-optation of opposition or elites and policy formation (Krol 2017; Robertson and John Reuter 2013). Naturally, the legislative strength of such parliaments is affected by the presence or absence of personalism, opposition, de facto election results, and even corruption (Wiebrecht 2021, 2024). While some scholars argue that parliaments may even constrain the authoritarian executive, empirical evidence suggests that they contribute to regime resilience by providing a forum for negotiation between public and/or private actors that the regime deems politically or economically relevant (Jensen, Malesky, and Weymouth 2014). Given this "horse-trading" function of authoritarian parliaments, parliamentary discourses can serve as a source of data for approximating whether individual MPs align themselves with the authoritarian incumbent or not. For example, business elites represented by the MPs or the MPs themselves may not necessarily differ from each other ideologically but may still put forward legislative proposals or queries that reflect different goals not necessarily fully aligned with those of the incumbent (Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik 2020; Lust-Okar 2013; Noble 2020).

The literature on authoritarian parliaments, elite contestation, and regime dynamics can provide a good starting point for capturing the possible drivers of rhetorical elite contestation. Regional or clan-based factionalism are known to be an important determinant of elite contestation in dictatorships (Geddes 2018, chap. 5; Svolik 2012). In some regimes, power is distributed among various factions within the ruling elite, who represent different regions or power bases. This is also relevant for clan-based regimes (Starr 2006), where the presidents and even members of the executive tended to have strong regional ties with their respective clans. For example, Kyrgyz presidents have to balance between Southern and Northern clans, while in Kazakhstan, ethnic Kazakhs subdivide themselves into the so-called *juzes*, loosely connected territorial and tribal divisions. Despite tribalistic origins, as noted by Ismailbekova (2021), the informal practices of clan politics are highly adaptable to formal political systems. As these factions compete for influence, naturally, regional groups more closely affiliated with the incumbent are also more likely to be more cohesive (Chen and Yeon Hong 2021; V. C. Shih 2016). Thus, I hypothesize the following:

H1. MPs from the same region and/or clan as the incumbent are more likely to align with the authoritarian incumbent.

The second explanatory factor is the topics that the MPs may discuss in the parliament. On the one hand, Truex's (2016) theory on the "authoritarian representation within bounds" provides a solid foundation for this hypothesis. Essentially, the theory argues that "authoritarian parliamentary representatives reflect the interests of their constituents on a broad range of issues, but remain reticent on sensitive issues core to the authoritarian state" (Truex 2016, 6). According to this theoretical framework, the ideal parliamentarian conveys citizen preferences on a wide range of nonpolitical issues – "weak preference issues" – but remains quiet about citizen demands for democratic reform – "strong preference issues." Allowing some rhetorical contestation, the autocrat addresses the

dual goal of collecting information on citizen preferences (Truex 2016, 7), while also allowing for some inter-elite contestation (Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik 2020). "Weak or no preference issues" might be connected to less controversial policy areas like economics, infrastructure, or public administration, while "strong preference issues" include security or foreign policy debates, which may be more tightly controlled (Kelly 2016). For example, a thematic analysis of the legislative proposals of the Brazilian military dictatorship showed that pro- or anti-incumbent positioning was strongly associated with the topics raised by MPs (Simison 2022). The studies of policy debates on social and economic topics in Russia or China show how the MPs occasionally attempt to push back against the ideas of the executive, rhetorically and/or tangibly (Frye 2017; V. C. Shih 2016). Some studies suggest that authoritarian regimes might even welcome topic-specific criticisms of the regime under certain circumstances and use them as a feedback mechanism (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013).

The problem with Truex's theory, however, is that the strong vs. weak typology does not always hold since there can be cross-national variation in terms of what issues are considered "strong" or "weak." For example, in Uzbekistan, at the surface level, a very sensitive question from the domain of foreign policy of joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union was heavily debated in the parliament.[1] This stands in contrast with regimes such as China, North Korea, or Russia, where such debate on a major foreign policy issue would not be imaginable. The elite contestation literature complicates the picture even further by suggesting that elites may rally around the incumbent rather than criticize them to maintain regime stability and protect the elites' collective interests, when the threat of regime collapse or popular unrest is high (Kofanov 2024). This is also visible when dictators rhetorically (and, sometimes, physically) resort to intimidation during moments of crisis, attempting to shape both the elite and public discourse (Baturo and Tolstrup 2024). Therefore, it would be rational to expect the rhetoric to be more aligned with the incumbent in such conditions, as economic problems become a "strong preference" issue then. This is also in line with the studies of authoritarian regimes relying on performative legitimacy that suggest that much more elite cohesion can be seen in the socio-economic domain, since it is crucial for demonstrating successful economic performance to the citizens (Ding 2020).

Given these contradictory insights from different literature streams, one could still hypothesize that the relationship between MPs' rhetoric and incumbent alignment is topic-dependent and varies across contexts, with greater alignment observed in policy areas deemed sensitive by the regime. Therefore, I hypothesize the following:

H2: Rhetorical alignment of MPs with the incumbent is likely to be associated with clusters of topics.

Some of the previously discussed literature partially connects with the next hypothesis on the possible effects of crises on rhetorical alignment. Theoretically, another possible trigger of contestation could be situations of political or economic crises. On the one hand, there is evidence suggesting that during economic crises, elites may be forced to jump in and protect the authoritarian incumbent from criticism, strengthening political and rhetorical alignment (Busygina and Klimovich 2024). This is also visible in the situations of war and military crises, with some examples of the crisis impacting the

parliamentary discourse coming from post-2022 Russia (Dollbaum and Kim 2024). Crises like wars and pandemics can also be slow and protracted in time. Others can be impending, such as, for example, the situations of uncertainty over political transitions (Brownlee 2007). This is particularly true in personalistic regimes where a long-standing leader is nearing the end of his/her rule without a clear successor. Those elites who were originally more closely aligned with the regime's previous leader may start associating themselves with different potential candidates. When elites are not sure whether the leadership change has fully occurred (e.g. a "duumvirate" situation), they may align themselves with the potential successor, but quickly reverse their position if necessary (Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014). Still, the contestation likelihood is lower when the transition mechanism is clear, such as in absolute monarchies or isolated single-party regimes (Schedler and Hoffmann 2016). Personalistic regimes show a reverse pattern though, and any forms of alignment with the former incumbent may evaporate once the leadership change is complete (Kelly 2016). After a transition, alignment with the new leaders or contenders becomes more pronounced.[2] Taking these factors into consideration, I hypothesize the following:

H3a: Rhetorical alignment of MPs with the incumbent is positively associated with crises.

H3b: Rhetorical alignment of MPs with the former incumbent is negatively associated with a leadership change in personalistic regimes.

Materials and methods

In this paper, I chose the case of Kazakhstan to test the generated hypotheses. I approximate rhetorical alignment through the cosine similarity comparison of the statements made by the Kazakhstani senators to the speeches of the (former) president and Elbasy, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The case of Kazakhstan was chosen to balance the generalizability of the results with research feasibility for several reasons. First, Kazakhstan is a typical case of a personalistic regime with a super-presidential republic (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024; Gross 2019). The regime exhibited all of the necessary characteristics to qualify as one – including the former president's personality cult (Fauve 2019), a very strong concentration of power in the hands of the executive (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024), lack of free and fair elections (Blackwood 2023), as well as systemic violations of the civil and political rights of its citizens (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024; Blackwood 2023; Gross 2019) as reported by different researchers. Moreover, Kazakhstan is known for its regionally tied clan-based politics (Starr 2006), allowing us to examine Hypothesis 1. Finally, in the indicated period, the country had undergone both a period of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and a political transition (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024), allowing us to test Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

In the timeframe of the analysis, the political landscape largely revolved around the two major figures in Kazakhstani politics – the first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and his appointed successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Figure 2 offers a schematic illustration of the timeframe in question and its periods relevant to the study. The first period is what

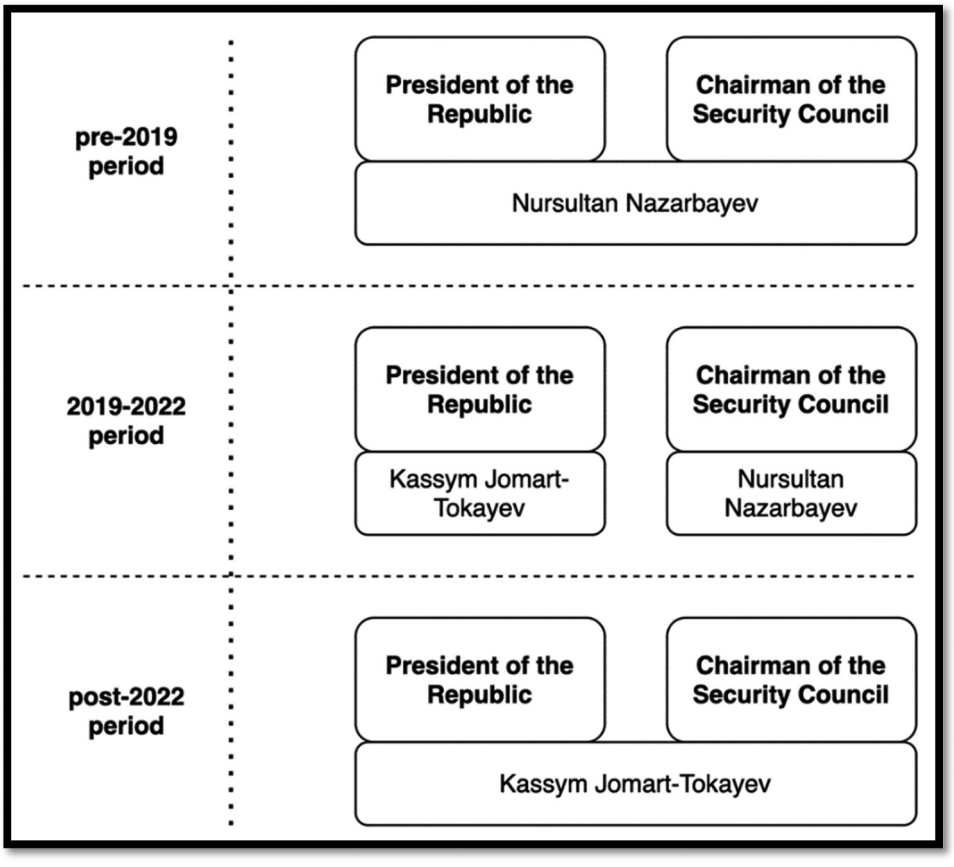

Figure 2. Leadership transition periods in Kazakhstan relevant for the study. Source: Author's elaboration in Draw.Io.

I refer to as the leadership transition period. It covers March 2019–January 2022, when Nursultan Nazarbayev formally resigned as president but still exercised very significant power over the country and could interfere with Tokayev's decision-making. The second period, from January 2022 onwards, coincided with the concentration of power in Tokayev's hands. The de facto 2022 leadership change presented an opportunity to examine the realignment of the behavior of elites in the aftermath of the partial collapse of the Nazarbayev clan. Thus, the expectation is that during the period of the uncertain "duumvirate," the senators had to decide whether to coalesce around the newly appointed Tokayev or not. If they chose to do so, this would be reflected in their attempts at rhetorical signaling, in line with the previous literature expectations (Baturo and Mikhaylov 2014).

Institutionally, this study focuses on the Kazakhstani Senate as a testing ground. The Senate is the upper chamber of the Kazakhstani parliament, with the function of representing different regions of the country.[3] Officially, the Senate has only unaffiliated and indirectly elected MPs, unlike the lower chamber, the Majilis. This makes the Senate a better and stricter testing ground for rhetorical contestation because MPs in the

Majilis could exhibit somewhat different rhetorical patterns to reflect the alleged leanings of their political parties, which could introduce additional noise to the speech data. The composition of the Senate, by contrast, makes it a highly de-ideologized body with a high concentration of pro-incumbent MPs, where rhetorical contestation would be less expected (i.e. a "less likely case"). Moreover, focusing on the Senate gives the advantage of testing the regional factionalism hypothesis in a clan-based and geographically diverse political setting. Finally, unlike in neighboring countries (e.g. Uzbekistan, the Russian Federation), the Senate has more institutional weight, since Senators may be promoted to high-level executive posts,[4] while the Chair of the Senate is the first in line of succession for the Kazakhstani presidency.

To measure the changes in rhetorical alignment, I analyze the statements of Kazakhstani senators to see how closely they aligned with the key speeches of Nursultan Nazarbayev. For this purpose, I used the cosine similarity analysis method. Cosine similarity analysis measures the similarity between two text documents by converting them into vectors and calculating the cosine of the angle between these vectors, with values ranging from −1 (opposite) to 1 (identical). In measuring rhetorical alignment, cosine similarity quantifies how closely political actors' language mirrors each other by analyzing vectorized text representations of speeches or statements (Linder et al. 2020). For example, this statement by Senator Nöketaeva from 24 June 2019, references several elements raised by Nazarbayev in his "annual address" speech that could be relevant for similarity (bolded by author):

> The First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Leader of the Nation, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in his Address to the People of Kazakhstan on October 5, 2018, entitled "**Growth of the Well-being of Kazakhstanis: Improving Income and Quality of Life**," gave the task of developing an "**economy of simple things**." As we all know, in order to implement the Leader's task, the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has developed a **Road Map for the Development of Light Industries for 2019–2021**. The **Road Map** provides for measures to increase the **social efficiency of domestic light industry products and support their competitiveness**.

Based on the cosine similarity analysis, each senator was assigned a Nazarbayev similarity score (see Annex IV in the online supplementary materials for the lists of senator scores by year). Several techniques of operationalization were tested for the cosine similarity analysis. First, I tried a bag-of-words method, which analyzes the frequency of words in texts and compares them. However, since the bag of words fully disregards the context, I chose to apply more advanced techniques such as Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS) and a word-to-vector model. In simple terms, LSS looks at patterns in how words are used, while word-to-vector models map relationships between words. The final version of this paper uses the LSS measurement approach for several reasons.[5] First, LSS is easily interpretable. The output practically shows how often certain words appear together in the speeches of the senators and the president's speeches. In this way, the algorithm can identify patterns without needing a large amount of complex data. Secondly, LSS captures relationships across the entire corpus, so words or documents that do not directly co-occur can still be semantically linked through intermediary terms. Thirdly, the LSS can be used with datasets of any size. Finally, LSS allows control for the number of latent dimensions/topics, which was set to the same number as the number of STM topics.[6] To summarize, apart from capturing simple lexical matching and semantic relationships,

the LSS-based approach captures contextual patterns, while the latent dimensions may capture underlying themes (e.g. ideological positions).

Naturally, LSS has its limitations. It cannot possibly account for subtle communicative features such as sarcasm, coded language, or humor, forms that often convey dissent in authoritarian settings. The issue can be exacerbated because of the automated translation of the text. The LSS also cannot catch direct flattery (e.g. constant name-referencing of Nazarbayev and/or his title). In this sense, alternative approaches, including AI-facilitated or hand-coding, could provide a useful comparative alternative in future research. However, LSS provides a good starting point as a measurement strategy compared to simpler alternatives.

For comparison and descriptive inference, I have also used the same approach to examine how similar the statements of the senators are to the post-2022 speeches of the new incumbent, Kassym Jomart-Tokayev. Using such an approach in the case of Kazakhstan is justified, given that there was a substantive qualitative difference between the two presidents in terms of their rhetorical positioning. Tokayev attempted to present himself as slightly more reformist as opposed to Nazarbayev (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024). His policy speeches, therefore, include discussions about more redistributive and inclusive policies of "New Kazakhstan," "the listening state," and "Just Kazakhstan" among other things. Nazarbayev's speeches, on the other hand, may come off as rhetorically conservative.

The paper works with two different datasets. The first dataset contains a sample of speeches of both presidents as a point of reference for the cosine similarity analysis. The annual policy speeches to the Parliament, known as the address to the nation, were chosen for this purpose. Specifically, the three most recent Nazarbayev speeches and the three most recent Tokayev speeches were used as reference texts. I chose to focus on their key speeches instead of analyzing a bigger sample because they are likely to represent the presidents' most important ideas and rhetorical styles.[7] Moreover, including only the key speeches reduces the potential for irrelevant content or noise that might be present in minor speeches or less significant addresses, which could skew the similarity analysis results. The details of this supplementary dataset with the sample of speeches by Tokayev and Nazarbayev can be found in Annex I of the online supplementary materials.[8]

The second dataset is a collection of 4,759 statements of Kazakhstani senators and other officials covered in the Senate based on 205 protocols between June 2019 and July 2024.[9] Each protocol, which represents a detailed write-up of the Senate session, was broken down into statements by individual speakers using the long list of their names. In the pre-processing stage, any statements that were shorter than 450 characters in total were removed from the processed main dataset given that a very large sample of these included very short statements (e.g. "Yes," "No," "Thank you," or technical statements by the Speaker such as "The floor is now given to Senator X"), which were irrelevant for the analytical process and would have created additional noise. Given that both the Senate documents and the speeches of the presidents contain segments of the documents in both Kazakh and Russian, all of them were translated into English. This was done because of the higher quality translation outputs as opposed to the automated Kazakh-Russian/Russian-Kazakh translation. Another reason is the lack of "text-as-data" tools in Kazakh for STM. The method of machine translation was applied, which is usually sufficient for automated text analyses given

that its goal here is to approximate similarities (Lucas et al. 2015; Proksch et al. 2019). Samples of the translated text were cross-referenced and checked by the author to make sure that there were no substantive deviations in the quality of the English translation. After iterative running of various models, the last version excluded statements by the Speaker of the Senate (i.e. Dariga Nazarbayeva and Maulen Ashimbayev), as most of their statements were of a technical nature related to the Senate proceedings, thus, significantly skewing their similarity scores.

To operationalize and account for the geographical dimension of H1, I added data on the possible regional affiliations of the senators and which *juzes* these affiliations could fall into. *Juzes* are loosely connected territorial and tribal divisions among Kazakhs. The concept of *juz* goes way back to the Kazakh Khanate period, but partly persisted as a traditionalist institution of patrimonialism even in contemporary post-1991 Kazakhstan (Starr 2006). The approach to the *juz* allocation by oblast can be found in Annex I of the online supplementary materials. As for H2, STM was applied to identify the policy topic of each statement.[10] STM is a statistical technique that automatically groups related words into topics, allowing one to see what general themes were discussed in all statements (Grimmer and Stewart 2013). During the pre-processing stage, apart from the regular standard stop words, some stop words were added for deletion too (e.g. "dear," "colleagues," etc). Other than this, sparse terms were removed with a 0.975 threshold. In total, a model with eight different topics was produced based on the diagnostics calculating coherence and exclusivity while accounting for the need to make the produced topics make qualitative sense (see Annex III, Figure 1 in the online supplementary materials for the plot). The top words for each topic were selected based on comparing the words from the highest probability terms approach, although the results of other models were also considered (see Annex III, List 1 for the short descriptions and word lists). Subsequently, each statement was assigned a single topic. The topic names were formed based on a random selection of 10 statements for each to qualitatively determine their consistency. Subsequently, the STM results were followed by qualitative validation of a sample of statements (200), where I estimated that ca. 91% of the topics were identified correctly.[11] The COVID-19 pandemic period to reflect hypothesis H3a was operationalized through two variables – a dummy was used for marking the emergency period declared by the Ministry of Health, and the number of deaths as a measurement of crisis intensity (see Annex I). Finally, as for the leadership change hypothesis (H3b), a binary variable was introduced to differentiate between the Nazarbayev and Tokayev regimes. Table 1 below summarizes the operationalization approach for the key variables.

To test the hypotheses, I then applied the method of a single-group interrupted time series analysis. The method analyzes a sequence of observations on a single group (in this paper, these are senators), collected at regular intervals before and after the intervention. In this case, the "intervention," i.e. a leadership change from Nazarbayev to Tokayev, affected the entire group. That said, no robust causal inferences can be made from this model despite the additional controls because of its observational nature. For this reason, the model results were then cross-referenced with the existing qualitative area studies and grey literature to see how meaningful its findings could be. Additional statistical tests were performed to see whether some topics might show a higher alignment with one leader compared to the other (including ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis as well as the effect size Eta-squared test for the ANOVA).

Table 1. Summary of the operationalization approach.

Variables (dependent and independent)	Operationalization approach	Data sources
Rhetorical alignment with Nazarbayev (Y; DV)	Nazarbayev similarity scores are generated for each senator based on the LSS-driven cosine similarity analysis of the senator statements vs. Nazarbayev speeches	Statements of the senators; Nazarbayev's speeches
Senator's statement theme (X1; IV)	Cross-referenced structural topic modeling approach.	Statements of the senators
Senator's committee (X2; IV)	Assigned manually based on the secondary data from the Senate's website.	Website of the Senate
Regional affiliation of the Senator (X3; IV)		Senate's website and data from the profiles of the senators
Leadership change (X4; IV)	Dummy variable for the post-Nazarbayev period starting from January 2022	Secondary data
Crisis period (X5; IV)	Dummy variable for the COVID-19 pandemic period in Kazakhstan	Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan
Crisis intensity (X6; IV)	A crisis intensity measure based on the average number of COVID-19 deaths per day (total number of deaths divided by the number of days between sessions)	Ministry of Health of Kazakhstan (via Our World in Data)

Source: Author's elaboration.

Empirical results

The descriptive statistics related to the rhetorical alignment of the senators with the incumbent include the data on the Nazarbayev and Tokayev similarity scores. Figure 3 illustrates a gradual decrease in Nazarbayev similarity between 2019 and 2022. However, instead of a further drop in these scores after 2022, which could have been explained by the completion of a leadership change, the scores started rising instead. On the other hand, there was no evidence of a growing Tokayev similarity score post-2022. The score for Tokayev stagnated for the observed period. To ensure that there was no full overlap between the two leaders' speech patterns, I calculated the correlation coefficient between the Nazarbayev and Tokayev similarity scores. The coefficient was around 0.60, indicating a substantial degree of independence. As for the senators themselves, the mean similarity score for Nazarbayev hovered around 0.33, which is a starting point in determining which senators demonstrated higher or lower levels of alignment (see Annex IV of the online supplementary materials for printouts for individual senators by year).

The distributions of similarity scores displayed in Figure 4 reveal notable differences between the two eras of Nazarbayev and Tokayev. The distribution for Tokayev similarity scores (represented in the darker shade) appears concentrated toward the lower end of the similarity score range, while the distribution for Nazarbayev (lighter shade) is more spread out and extends further into the middle and higher similarity ranges. This pattern suggests that senators' statements tend to be less similar to Tokayev's rhetoric overall, whereas there is greater variation and some higher alignment with Nazarbayev's tone and language.

The regression analysis results in Table 2 reveal that the 2022 leadership change did not seem to significantly affect the Nazarbayev similarity scores. This finding is rather curious because it does seem to partly support the argument of the critics of Tokayev's reforms, who allege that there is no substantive difference between the Nazarbayev and Tokayev regimes (Tlegenova and Beysembaev 2023). There could be various reasons why

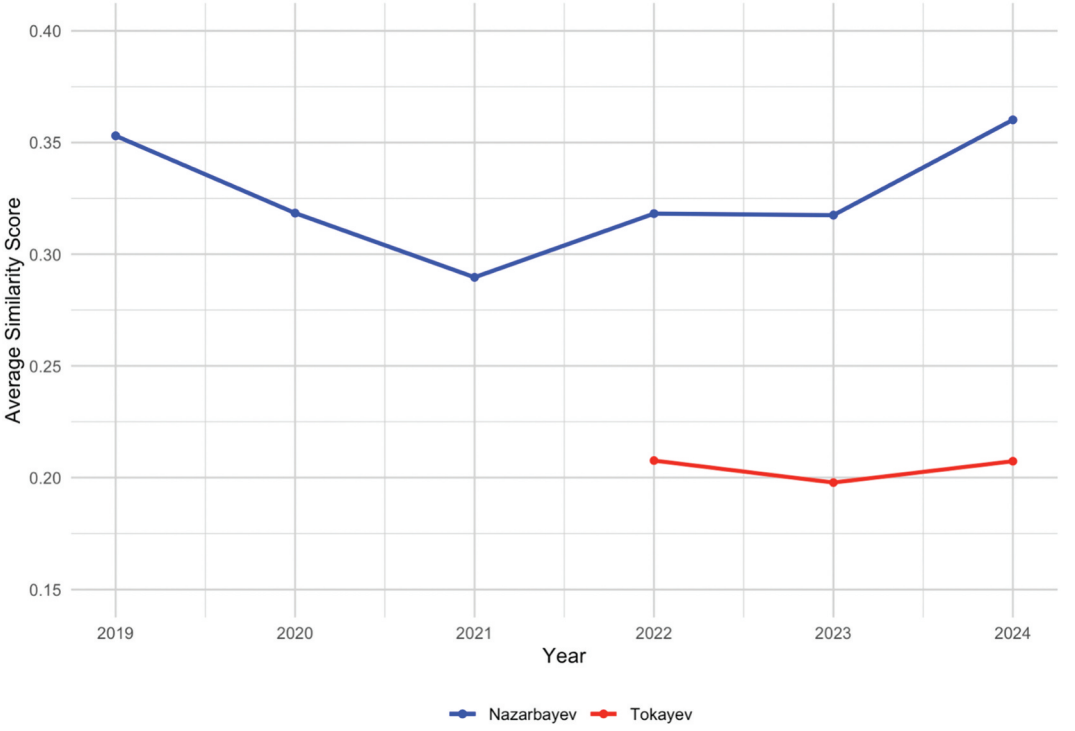

Figure 3. Average alignment of senators with Nazarbayev vs. Tokayev in terms of rhetorical similarity by year. Source: Author's elaboration (see R Annex for the codes).

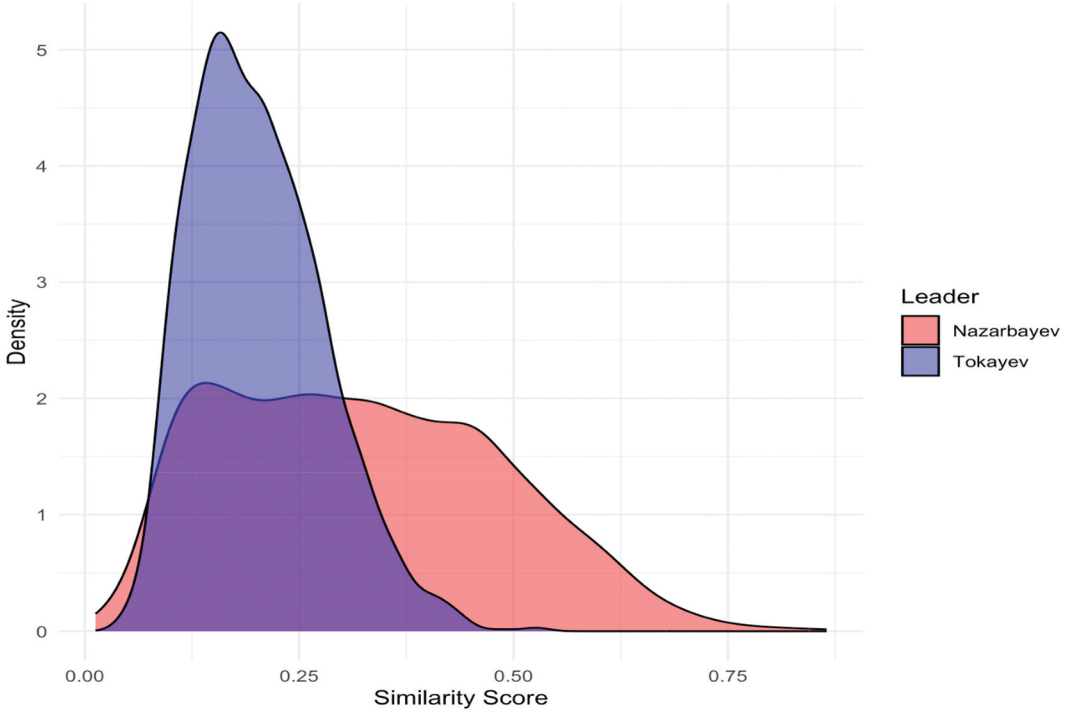

Figure 4. Density plot of the distribution of Nazarbayev vs. Tokayev similarity scores. Source: Author's elaboration (see R Annex for the codes).

Table 2. Main model for Nazarbayev similarity scores.

	Dependent variable:
	Nazarbayev similarity score
2022 Leadership Change	0.007
	(0.007)
Topic 2. Constitutional Affairs, Electoral System, Legal/Judiciary	0.313***
	(0.020)
Topic 3. Regional Development and Economy	0.144***
	(0.020)
Topic 4. Economy, Industry, Agriculture, and Energy	0.345***
	(0.020)
Topic 5. Rule of Law, Citizen Rights, and Criminality	0.321***
	(0.019)
Topic 6. International Relations, EEU, and Trade	0.180***
	(0.020)
Topic 7. Social Affairs, Emergency, and Military	0.324***
	(0.020)
Topic 8. Budget and Finances	0.209***
	(0.020)
Affiliation: Kishi juz	−0.013
	(0.009)
Affiliation: Orta juz	−0.0002
	(0.007)
Affiliation: Uly juz	−0.018*
	(0.008)
COVID-19 Emergency	−0.002
	(0.007)
COVID-19 Crisis Intensity	0.0003
	(0.0002)
Year: 2020	−0.013
	(0.010)
Year: 2021	−0.031*
	(0.012)
Year: 2022	−0.015
	(0.011)
Year: 2023	−0.037***
	(0.011)
Year: 2024	−0.012
	(0.011)
Committee: Constitutional Legislation	−0.037**
	(0.013)
Committee: Finance and Budget	−0.029*
	(0.013)
Committee: International Relations	−0.014
	(0.013)
Committee: Economic Policy	−0.005
	(0.014)
Committee: Socio-Cultural Development	−0.026*
	(0.013)
Committee: Agrarian Issues	−0.014
	(0.013)
Committee: Chair Statements	−0.005
	(0.021)
Constant	0.153***
	(0.024)
Observations	2,557
R^2	0.353
Adjusted R^2	0.346
Residual Std. Error	0.117 (df = 2531)
F Statistic	55.193*** (df = 25; 2531)

Notes: Topic 1 and Year 2019 are used as reference categories; *$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$. Source: Author's elaboration.

this occurred—e.g. even after the transition, many senators may have continued following the established norms of behavior and rhetoric in the Senate. Some degree of continuity, including elite consensus-building norms, may have persisted, reducing the potential for high levels of rhetorical contestation. Similarly, neither of the two operationalizations of the COVID-19 crisis shows any statistical significance. By contrast, the findings indicate that the topics of discussion seem to matter as determinants of similarity, although there is significant variation.

As for the regional affiliation, the evidence is mostly negative. Only one of the regional affiliations was statistically significant – Uly juz, affiliated with both Nazarbayev and Tokayev. However, the effect size was rather negligible compared to the other predictors and to the constant itself. By contrast, thematic predictors demonstrate a more interesting picture. First, the committee membership of the senators played a role. Members of the Committees on Constitutional Legislation; Finance and Budget; and Socio-Cultural Development exhibited statistically significant and slightly negative effects. However, the largest effects were observed concerning the topics raised by the senators, and the variation across the topics was quite substantial. An alternative model with topic shares rather than individual topics in Tables 10 and 11 in Annex V of the online supplementary materials shows a more pronounced effect (where topics are even more clustered by the socio-economic vs. socio-political dimension).

To test the robustness of the results, several unsupervised learning techniques and statistical tests were applied. First, despite trying diverse ways of measuring the outcome, in all three models (a bag of words, word to vector, and LSS), the same pattern reoccurred – the leadership change did not play a statistically significant role, while the topics remained an important explanatory factor. Second, I applied the ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis tests to see whether there was any topic-specific rhetorical alignment between the senators and the respective incumbent. In fact, not only for Nazarbayev, but also for Tokayev similarity scores, the ANOVA results show that the topic variable has a statistically significant effect on the similarity scores, as can be seen in Table 3. The F-values for Tokayev and Nazarbayev are both significant at a very low p-level, indicating that there are substantial differences in similarity scores across different topics. This suggests that the topic as an explanatory variable plays a strong role in explaining the variance in the similarity scores. Finally, I ran the Kruskal-Wallis test, a non-parametric alternative to ANOVA, which showed significant differences across topics for both Tokayev and Nazarbayev, as can be seen in Table 4. The matrix of topics itself is presented in Table 5. The list of words associated with each topic is presented in a separate list in Annex III of the online supplementary materials. Finally, several models with varying specifications and controls were tested (Annex V), showing similar patterns. This includes a senator-year

Table 3. Summary of the ANOVA test results.

Model	Source	Df	Sum Sq.	Mean Sq.	F-value	Pr(>F)
Tokayev similarity scores	Topics	7	1.738	0.24832	51.12	<2e-16 ***
	Residuals	1,748	8.491	0.00486		
Nazarbayev similarity scores	Topics	7	46.23	6.604	506	<2e-16 ***
	Residuals	3,477	45.38	0.013		

Note: 1,729 observations were deleted due to missingness for Tokayev (until January 2022). Significance codes: *** 0.001, **0.01, *0.05, "." 0.1.
Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 4. Summary of Kruskal-Wallis test results.

	Chi-squared	Df	p-value
Similarity score (Tokayev)	311.77	7	<2.2e-16
Similarity score (Nazarbayev)	1869.9	7	<2.2e-16

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 5. Matrix of STM topics.

1. Procedural	5. Social Affairs, Emergency, and Military
2. Regional Development and Economy	6. International Relations, EEU, and Trade
3. Constitutional Affairs, Electoral System, Legal/Judiciary	7. Budget and Finances
4. Economy, Industry, Agriculture, and Energy	8. Rule of Law, Citizen Rights, and Criminality

Source: Author's elaboration.

– based model, a model with 12 topics, and a post-2022 model controlling for Tokayev similarity scores, too.

Moreover, I ran additional statistical tests for this segment of the analysis. The Eta-squared values in Table 6 show how much the topics differ in terms of their alignment with Tokayev or Nazarbayev.[12] On the one hand, the topics have a moderate influence on how similar parliamentary statements are to Tokayev's speeches. On the other, the topic is a much stronger predictor of similarity to Nazarbayev's speeches. This means that the degree to which MPs' statements resemble Nazarbayev's rhetoric depends more heavily on the topic being discussed. Finally, the Tukey HSD test compared the mean differences in each president's similarity scores between pairs of topics (see Annex II of the online supplementary materials for a script with full printouts).

To gain betters insights with regard to H2 and see whether there was any "strong-weak preference" alignment, I zoomed into the variation in the absolute difference in mean Nazarbayev and Tokayev similarity scores across topics, as this could show another layer of contestation. Figure 5 shows that the three topics that exhibit the largest differences in Nazarbayev vs. Tokayev similarity scores are, respectively, Topics 3 (Regional Development and Economy), 4 (Economy, Industry, Agriculture, and Energy), 7 (Social Affairs, Emergency, and Military), and 8 (Budget and Finances). By contrast, gaps on the socio-political topics were much smaller in Topics 2, 5, and 6.

Moreover, since differences in similarity scores could correlate with the volume of discussion of each topic by each leader, I have examined the yearly trends in the discussion of topics by senators to clarify whether the differences are due to substantial variation. The volume normalization trends in Figure 6 provide support for this interpretation in line with H2 by showing that socio-economic topics, on average, were more frequently discussed. Moreover, there is an important caveat regarding socio-political issues (particularly, domestic Topics 2 and 5). While Figure 6 indicates that these topics

Table 6. The effect size (Eta-squared) for the ANOVA.

Parameter	Eta^2	95% confidence interval
Topic (Tokayev similarity)	0.17	[0.14, 1.00]
Topic (Nazarbayev similarity)	0.50	[0.49, 1.00]

Note on one-sided CIs: Upper bound fixed at [1.00].
Source: Author's elaboration.

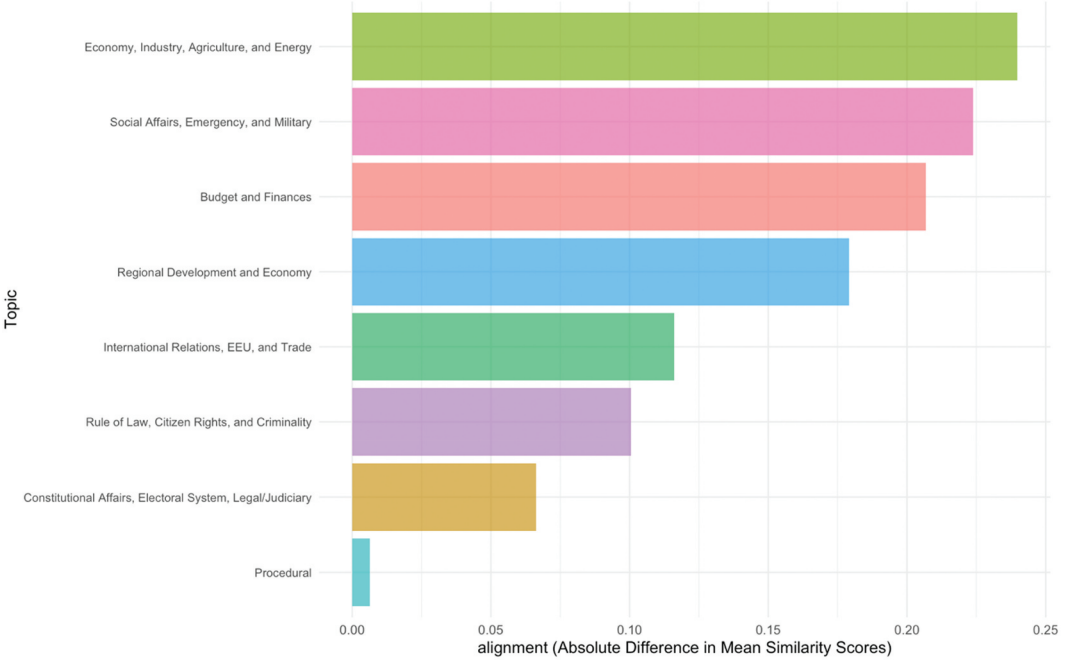

Figure 5. Absolute difference in Nazarbayev-Tokayev mean similarity scores by topic. For additional visualizations of the relevant descriptive statistics on the Tokayev and Nazarbayev similarity scores by topic, please see Annex iii of the online supplementary materials. Source: Author's elaboration.

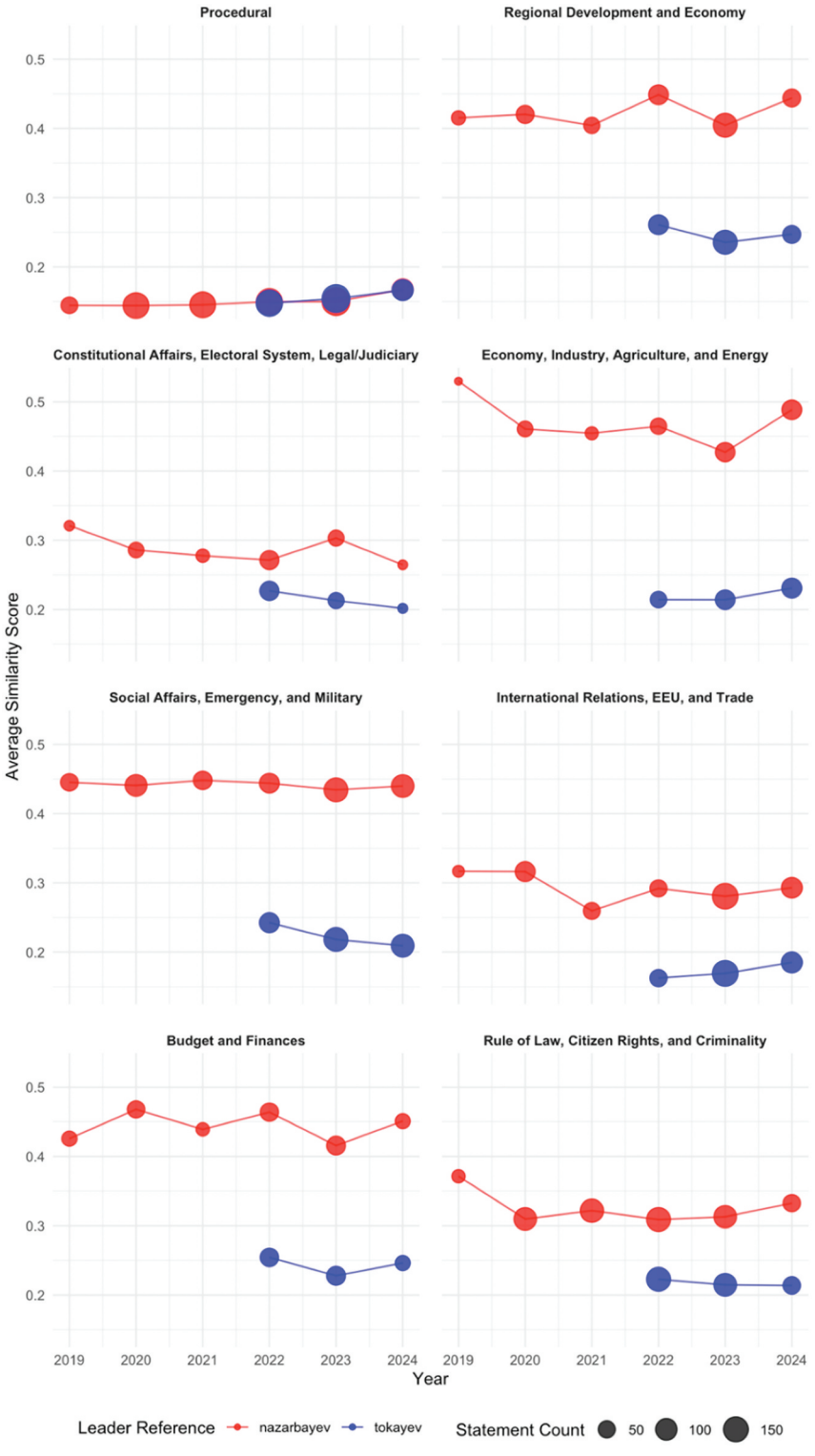

Figure 6. Trends in the Nazarbayev vs. Tokayev similarity scores by topic with discussion volume. Note: Point size reflects number of statements per topic-year.

have consistently smaller gaps, they also received less attention, possibly suggesting deliberate de-emphasis.

Discussion of the results

The study has presented an example of how rhetorical alignment between the elites and the incumbent may play out in an authoritarian parliament using the case of the Kazakhstani Senate. First, as for Hypothesis 1, largely negative evidence is observed – only Uly juz affiliation showed some statistically significant results, but with a very small effect size. Without ethnographic, archival, or interview-based parliamentary evidence, only limited inferences can be made. However, future studies linking the rhetoric and the political behavior of the elites in authoritarian regimes could shed more light on this question. The differences in mean similarity scores for Nazarbayev and Tokayev on socio-economic issues could be attributed to several factors, one of them being strong legacies of Nazarbayev's patrimonial system. After the 2022 leadership change, Kazakhstan experienced several instances of intra-elite infighting over resources, when the Nazarbayev-affiliated oligarchs and clans were pressured by Tokayev's administration. The government passed the so-called Act on Asset Recovery, aiming to repatriate some of the offshore assets of Nazarbayev's oligarchs (Gaissin 2023), some of whom fled from the country and/or relocated their assets to remote offshore locations. A few oligarchic figures opposing the Tokayev administration were immediately imprisoned, such as the Satybaldy family and Kairat Boranbayev (Radiosy 2023). Others had to make significant financial contributions to the newly established social initiatives launched by Tokayev (Lillis 2022). In that sense, the post-January 2022 period became a time of elite realignment in Kazakhstan, all the while new elections to the Senate happened only in early 2023, providing a platform for the realignment of the elites.

Other than that, there is largely negative evidence against Hypotheses 3a and 3b on the effects of leadership change and crises. These are curious findings, which deserve a follow-up investigation of their own – to what extent is this driven by institutional inertia specific to Kazakhstan? For instance, the Senate's design and its history under Nazarbayev might limit the extent to which elite factions could emerge. There could also be other intervening variables at play. For example, the fact that the leadership change was not mass-driven but rather elite-driven could have been an important factor because the new leader feels less pressure to distance himself from the old regime. Here, again, comparative research could add more insights – either based on a country comparison (e.g. with Kyrgyzstan) or based on a comparison of elite voting behavior/policy actions, and rhetoric. Another research avenue coming from the rejection of Hypothesis 3b pertains to the role of crises in authoritarian regimes. The lack of effects from the COVID-19 pandemic in this model may suggest that there are varieties of crises in authoritarian regimes and that not all crises necessarily become a political game-changer.[13]

By contrast, there was sufficient evidence in favor of Hypothesis 2 on the patterns of topic-specific rhetorical contestation. Using all the outputs of STM, an in-depth examination of the Senate discussion patterns suggests that the rhetorical contestation clustered around socio-economic vs. socio-political topics (with socio-economic topics showing a higher level of alignment with Nazarbayev even after his departure). Additional statistical evidence from the magnitude analysis suggests that some topics might be closer to

Tokayev, while others to Nazarbayev. These findings also correspond to what is suggested by some of the country-specific qualitative evidence. In line with Ding's theory, this rhetorical cohesion in the socio-economic domain can be partly attributed to the Nazarbayev's regime strategy of economic performative legitimation, which remained stable even with the 2022 leadership change (Abishev, Kurmanov, and Sabitov 2024; Omelicheva 2016).

Naturally, the results of this analysis are far from perfectly precise; there are some indications that the elite contestation process has been going on for a while before its most violent public outbursts in 2022. Although the 2023 Senate elections announced by Tokayev in the aftermath of the regime change cleared out a lot of senators appointed in the Nazarbayev era, the question of the relationship between the rhetorical similarity to Nazarbayev and the status of being purged remains outside of this paper's scope but should be explored in future research. However, if the list is expanded to capture the whole 2019–2024 period, an interesting trend occurred in the aftermath of Nazarbayev's 2019 resignation. Shortly after Tokayev assumed the presidency, the top four senators with the highest Nazarbayev similarity scores by far lost their seats,[14] which also coincided with the removal of Nazarbayev's daughter as the speaker of the Senate (Klevtsova 2020). Naturally, finding the causal link between their high Nazarbayev similarity scores and dismissals would be very hard, if not impossible, given the problem of authoritarian opacity. Yet, what matters is another research question: could rhetorical alignment be important in shaping the incumbent's reaction to the patterns of intra-elite contestation? On the other hand, how can the individual elite members signal their discontent in a closed authoritarian regime, if at all? As evidenced by some analyzed samples, the degree of rhetorical (mis)alignment varied not only quantitatively but qualitatively. While in some instances, it merely referred to the non-mentioning of certain topics, on other occasions, there were instances of policy divergence between Nazarbayev and Tokayev. For example, Senator Ensegenov's discussion of the 2020 draft law to liberalize the legislation on the conduct of peaceful assemblies was very much in line with Tokayev's policy line, whereas Nazarbayev rarely, if ever, discussed such liberalization:

> . . . This draft law aims to regulate public relations arising during the exercise of the right of citizens of Kazakhstan to peaceful and unarmed assembly, meetings, rallies and demonstrations, parades and standing on barriers, as established in Article 32 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan. It consists of 21 articles grouped into three [sections]. The draft law envisages the repeal of the currently valid Law "On the organization and conduct of peaceful assemblies, rallies, marches, pickets and demonstrations in the Republic of Kazakhstan" adopted on March 17, 1995. The draft law was prepared within the framework of the task of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, to improve the legislation on rallies in his Address to the people of Kazakhstan entitled "Constructive public dialogue—the basis of stability and prosperity of Kazakhstan" on September 2, 2019. . . .

Future research will also need to develop additional measurement tools that will allow us to account for such substantial divergence as opposed to the non-mentioning of the topics (e.g. through LLM usage). This would also be helpful for analyses of the individual senator statements (from lowest to highest). So far, the patterns are not always consistent or indicative of tangible contestation – although some consistent cases such as with Senator Safinov are interesting. The latter exhibited consistently low Nazarbayev similarity

scores but also got into a conflict with a reportedly Nazarbayev-affiliated businessman in 2020–2022.[15]

Overall, the paper's findings contribute to the existing research on the communication of elite cohesion in authoritarian regimes. The findings of the paper go in line with the arguments made by Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik (2020) that MPs in authoritarian parliaments may dissent or advocate for certain topics, but only within certain boundaries of political sensitivity. The concept of "embedded rhetorical contestation" could be helpful for the future exploration of authoritarian legislatures and authoritarian regime dynamics that pay closer attention to the agency of the individual elite members. I see embedded rhetorical contestation as a phenomenon when rhetorical contestation does not necessarily happen across certain ideological binaries or even around certain elite clusters, but rather around specific topic clusters that may be relevant either for the elites themselves, for the authoritarian incumbent, or for the general population. Further work could be done focused specifically on the concept's development and integration into the broader theory of authoritarian representation within bounds.

This paper is only one of the first steps in empirically studying the communication of elite cohesion in authoritarian regimes and faces major limitations. Ideally, an even larger sample of documents should be analyzed to make the findings of the study more robust. Dictionary-based approaches could also be explored to make estimates more precise and tailored to the cases of non-personalistic authoritarian regimes. Approaches driven by manual qualitative coding could be particularly helpful for better theorizing the patterns of rhetorical cohesion or contestation in authoritarian regimes. This would be important, for example, for developing better measurements of sycophantic rhetoric, which is much harder to capture with big data methods. On the other hand, patterns of rhetorical cohesion/contestation may not solely be a product of the institutional set-up of the parliament. Informal pressures such as censorship and/or self-censorship, which may limit rhetorical divergence in ways that are not visible in text-based analysis, are very common in authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the paper's findings could not fully exclude other intervening factors, which might have been working behind the scenes, such as covert co-optation or repression targeting the elites (Daminov 2025; Robertson and John Reuter 2013).

The research design, ideally, should be improved and replicated in a comparative setting. The Kazakhstani Senate is only one case, representing a specific regime type. As mentioned before, comparing different countries within and across regime types – such as monarchies, one-party dictatorships, and military juntas – would be helpful here. Naturally, not all authoritarian parliaments make the transcripts of their sessions available online, with many regimes preferring to hide such information. This challenge is illustrative of the authoritarian opacity problem that the researchers of authoritarian regimes face in their work, but there are still some parliaments, such as Azerbaijan's Milli Meclis or Russia's Federal Assembly, where the information is available. Another useful contribution from such comparative work may come in the measurement domain. For example, comparing data from other even more typical cases of personalistic authoritarian regimes (e.g. Azerbaijan, North Korea) could give better pointers at determining the cut-off lines for rhetorical cohesion vs. contestation. Cross-case analysis will also allow for accounting for some differences in ideology, regime type, and, potentially, cultural issues. Moreover, in this Kazakhstan-specific study, the limited size of the presidential text corpus and its

aggregation over a year-long period could have obscured subtle rhetorical shifts that might have occurred over shorter timeframes. In this sense, alternative operationalization approaches could be piloted in the analysis of other regime cases.

Despite its limitations, this paper makes four contributions to the existing literature on comparative authoritarianism. First, it shows the value of using the statements made in authoritarian parliaments as a data source for the study of authoritarian politics. It can be further developed through comparative analyses of similar cases (e.g. Azerbaijan, Russia). Second, the paper's findings suggest that the average levels of rhetorical contestation in Kazakhstan did not change despite the leadership transition between Nazarbayev and Tokayev, adding further credibility to the scholars arguing that Kazakhstan had not undergone a systemic political transformation, even though there is topic-specific rhetorical divergence in the Senate. Third, the paper pitches the concept of embedded rhetorical contestation for future research of elite contestation in authoritarian regimes by building on the scholarship of Schedler and Hoffman, Baturo and Mikhaylov, Gandhi, Noble, and Svolik. Fourth, it offers methodological value, since the data collected in this paper could be used for parliamentary discourse analysis in Kazakhstan or integrated into future cross-country datasets.[16] Overall, the paper's methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions highlight the need for developing more communication-sensitive theories of elite contestation.

Notes

1. Publicly, this discussion caused controversy, but only to the extent that it benefited Tashkent's interest in providing the Kremlin with a reason why Uzbekistan would not join in the end. For the descriptive details of this public debate in Uzbekistan and Majlis, read Kirill Krivosheev's Carnegie analytical write-up at https://web.archive.org/web/20230514182427 and https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80918.
2. A variety of causal mechanisms could be possible here. For example, elite co-optation or elite repression strategies may be used (Nugent 2020, chap. 2).
3. There are 40 indirectly elected senators, who are elected for six years by the local assemblies from the 17 Kazakhstani provinces and three national cities. On top of that, there are 10 presidentially appointed senators, who may be appointed or dismissed at president's volition.
4. There is a variety of anecdotal evidence suggesting this: e.g. Senator Alnazarova appointed to a ministerial position; Senator Abdirov appointed as the Electoral Commission Chair; Senator Kurishbaev appointed to the National Academy of Science Presidency; not to mention Tokayev's 2019 presidential appointment.
5. For anchoring, I take entire presidential speech vectors as a basis. The code then calculates a latent semantic representation for Nazarbayev and Tokayev based on all their respective speeches, which in effect serves as an anchor or reference for the similarity calculations.
6. To avoid any inferential problems related to temporality and sequencing, the cosine similarity analysis did not use future speeches of the presidents to analyze past statements of the MPs. Instead, the script compared each MP's statement only to those speeches of Tokayev that were available up to the latest point in time. Finally, given that Tokayev was not in full control of the country until January 2022, his 2019–2022 speeches were not taken into consideration because they could have been impacted by Nazarbayev.
7. Tokayev's first major speech from early January 2022, shortly after the leadership change, was used as a starting point.
8. To make sure the presidential addresses cover a similar range of topics, I ran STM on the presidential speeches (Annex VI) and then qualitatively cross-referenced them with the STM of the senators' statements, ensuring that the presidents covered all the main topics.

9. The database consists of all the protocols of public meetings of the Senate in the indicated timeframe. The closed sessions have not been reported, but the practice of closed sessions is not very common in the Senate. Joint sessions with the Majilis were omitted to hold the pool of respondents relatively constant. Moreover, the Kazakhstani parliament does not normally hold sessions in the summer, i.e. there is a recess. Finally, there was an instance of a mis-uploaded protocol, which duplicated a previous session. The duplicate protocol was deleted.
10. In the model, "name + s(pdf_date) + speaker_Ashimbayev + regime_Tokayev + non_senator + covid_pandemic + region + affiliation + convocation" are included as prevalence covariates affecting the likelihood of topics appearing in a document.
11. An alternative model with 20 topics was tried out and produced somewhat similar regression results. However, the accuracy was somewhat lower and occasionally the topics became macro-topics as well (e.g. the topics of foreign policy and culture being lumped together into one macro-topic).
12. Eta-squared can be interpreted as the proportion of the total variance in the similarity scores that is explained by the differences between topics.
13. A particularly interesting case for future research would be 2010–2026 Hungary, which was affected by various crises, but only one of them (2024 presidential pardon scandal) seemed to have triggered rhetorical and other forms of contestation.
14. This includes Senators Beysenbayev, Gromov, Muqaev, and Kurishbaev – although Senator Beysenbayev may be an outlier due to the current sample size.
15. See, for example, https://kaztag.kz/ru/news/ustroivshiy-miting-v-astane-popytalsya-skryt-svyaz-s-semey-nazarbaeva.
16. While research on discourses in authoritarian parliaments is also quite niche, it is far more common than rhetorical similarity analyses comparing the elites with the authoritarian incumbent. For examples of studies analyzing parliamentary discourses in authoritarian regimes that use automated text analysis methods see, for example, Bulut und İlter (2020) or Chizhik and Sergeyev (2021).

Author contributions

CRediT: **Ildar Daminov:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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