

## Social capital in Kazakhstan: a case of Taldykorgan city

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In December 2016 Kazakhstan is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Within these years it entered the list of fifty most competitive nations<sup>1</sup>, became a key player in Eurasia with memberships in seventy international organizations, attracted billions of dollars worth of investments and increased its GDP per capita by forty times.<sup>2</sup> According to Onyusheva, competitiveness of national economy is closely related to competitiveness of country's human capital.<sup>3</sup> Defined by Becker as individuals' stock of knowledge, information, ideas and skills<sup>4</sup> embodied in one's ability to perform labor so as to produce economic value, the human capital concept has laid the foundations of Kazakhstan's several national development strategies such as "Kazakhstan-2030" and "Salamatty Kazakhstan".<sup>5</sup> These strategies are based on a premise that investment in human capital is crucial to country's socio-economic development. While attractiveness of human capital concept in Kazakhstan is hard to overestimate, the value of social capital – 'a societal resource that links citizens to each other and enables them to pursue their common objectives more effectively'<sup>6</sup> – has been somewhat overlooked.

In this paper I utilize Putnam's definition of social capital: features of social life – networks, norms of reciprocity and interpersonal trust - that foster citizens' civic engagement which in turn results in governments' better political performance.<sup>7</sup> There is a very limited scholarship on social capital in Kazakhstan.<sup>8</sup> Most of these

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<sup>1</sup> See Global Competitiveness Index (2015-2016) developed by World Economic Forum at <http://reports.weforum.org/global-competitiveness-report-2015-2016/competitiveness-rankings/>

<sup>2</sup> Zhubanysh Baigurinov et al. 2016. "Pod Znakom 25-Letiya Nezavisimosti." Kazpravda, At <http://www.kazpravda.kz/articles/view/pod-znakom-25-letiya-nezavisimosti/>, accessed 26 October 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Irina Onyusheva. 2013. "Human Capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the Global Competitiveness Report," *Actual Problems of Economics* 4, 142.

<sup>4</sup> Gary S. Becker. 1964. *Human Capital : A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, reprint.

<sup>5</sup> National Analytical Center. 2016. "Human Capital Development." National Analytical Center, At [http://www.nac.gov.kz/en/human\\_capital/](http://www.nac.gov.kz/en/human_capital/), accessed 28 October 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Dietlind Stolle. 2007. "Social Capital." in: Russell J. Dalton and Hans-Dieter Klingemann ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; reprint.

<sup>7</sup> R.D. Putnam. 1995. "Turning in, Turning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 28, 4.

<sup>8</sup> See Thomas Wan and Blossom Lin. 2003. "Social Capital, Health Status, and Health Services Use among Older Women in Almaty, Kazakhstan." in: Jennie Jacobs Kronenfeld ed., *Reorganizing Health Care Delivery Systems: Problems of Managed Research in the Sociology of Health Care. Research in the Sociology of Health Care*. Emerald; reprint; Wendell Schwab. 2015. "Islam, Fun, and Social Capital in Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Affairs* 2, 1; Baizhol Karipbayev. 2014. "Social Capital in the Conditions of Social and Economic Transformation of Modern Kazakhstan Society," *World Applied Sciences Journal* 31, 2.

studies only partially explore stocks of social capital without adopting a systematic and holistic approach. Nonetheless, most authors and opinion polls illustrate low interpersonal trust and poor membership in voluntary associations – two classical indicators of social capital. Thus, based on AsiaBarometer survey carried out in 2005, Spehr and Kassenova report 78% of respondents in Kazakhstan indicating either little or no trust in others.<sup>9</sup> Further, the World Values Survey conducted in Kazakhstan in 2011 shows that more than 90% of respondents do not belong to any voluntary organizations. To compare, an advanced democracy such as Netherlands has 52% of distrusters and on average 70% of respondents who do not join any voluntary organizations according to the same World Values Survey. All of this suggests low stocks of social capital in contemporary Kazakhstan.

Social capital has a regional dimension.<sup>10</sup> Putnam demonstrated this argument by studying performance of twenty regional Italian governments. He concluded that regional variation of interpersonal trust and civic engagement determined why Northern Italy was more democratic and performed better than Southern Italy. This research is interested in explaining what appears to be higher than average stock of social capital in a provincial city of Taldykorgan located in the southeast of Kazakhstan. My observation of city's development in the last ten years shows high degree of dwellers' involvement in voluntary organizations, awareness of local and national affairs, and participation in local politics. All of these civic activities unfold around a regional newspaper '*Vechernii Taldykorgan*' [Evening Taldykorgan]. Established during post-independence euphoria in 1993 by a local entrepreneur Viktor Bukov, this private newspaper like no other regional newspaper in Kazakhstan has become a tribune for voicing public's concerns with such issues as corruption, ineffective local government, social welfare, etc. Not only does the newspaper publish readers' open letters and petitions addressed to local government, but it also organized a number of voluntary organizations such as Reading club, Chess club, Youth Football club, and most importantly, a Public Chamber consisting of local citizens and aimed at interest articulation and policy advocacy.

The role of mass media in affecting social capital has received some scholarly attention. According to Tocqueville and his proponents, media in general and newspapers in particular foster social trust and generate cooperation in voluntary associations.<sup>11</sup> Others, however, claim that media 'reduces rather than reinforces or nurtures social capital'.<sup>12</sup> Putnam, for instance, attributes decline of

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<sup>9</sup> Scott Spehr and Nargis Kassenova. 2012. "Kazakhstan: Constructing Identity in a Post-Soviet Society," *Asian Ethnicity* 13, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Sriya Iyer et al. 2005. "Social Capital, Economic Growth and Regional Development'," *Regional Studies* 39, 8; R.D. Putnam. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* Princeton: Princeton University Press, reprint.

<sup>11</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville and Arthur Goldhammer. 2004. *Democracy in America*, The Library of America New York: Library of America : Distributed to the trade in the U.S. by Penguin Putnam, reprint, 601.

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Wallack. 2000. "The Role of Mass Media in Creating Social Capital: A New Direction for Public Health." in: Brian D. Smedley and Leonard S. Syme ed., *Promoting Health: Intervention Strategies from Social and Behavioral Research* Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press; reprint, 343.

civic engagement in the US to the arrival of television.<sup>13</sup> Increased television viewing led to decreasing social trust and political participation. Newspaper reading, on the other hand, was positively related to civic engagement. Pippa Norris extends Putnam's thesis by arguing that it is not the time spent watching television per se, but the content of watched programs that really affects viewers' social trust and political activity.<sup>14</sup> As we can see one needs to differentiate between effects of television and newspapers on social capital. While there is still lack of consensus regarding the effects of television, most scholars agree with the positive effects of newspaper reading on interpersonal trust and various forms of political participation.<sup>15</sup>

This paper aims to analyze the effect of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* newspaper on social capital in Taldykorgan city. Does reading *Vechernii Taldykorgan* create more trusting and actively engaged citizens in civic activities? While there is little doubt that frequent reading of newspapers positively affects social capital in democracies, little is known about this relationship in nondemocratic states such as Kazakhstan.

There this relationship would be quite counterintuitive for two reasons. First, no authoritarian regime would normally tolerate media that is critical of regime. Second, authoritarian regimes would not be interested in nurturing social capital because it is believed to undermine autocracies and foster population's democratic values and norms of cooperation.<sup>16</sup> This could explain why social capital concept is so neglected by the Kazakh government. However, looking at Taldykorgan case we see a puzzling situation in which a provincial newspaper is among other things establishing as well as encouraging citizens to establish voluntary associations, scrutinizing local authorities and promoting civic activism thereby at first sight fostering social capital. Why is the regime tolerating this? Exploring the relationship between *Vechernii Taldykorgan* newspaper and social capital in Taldykorgan would contribute to the literature on the role of media in shaping social capital in nondemocracies. More importantly, it would further our understanding of the nature of social capital outside of established democracies.

I proceed as follows: in the next section I set the context by presenting Kazakhstan's political system and introducing Taldykorgan city. Then I discuss social capital in non-democracies with a view to characterize Kazakhstani social capital. Research methodology follows next. After that I analyze findings and draw conclusions.

## Context

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<sup>13</sup> Putnam, "Turning in, Turning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America."

<sup>14</sup> Pippa Norris. 1996. "Does Television Erode Social Capital? A Reply to Putnam," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 29, 3.

<sup>15</sup> G.H. Stempel and T Hargrove. 1996. "Mass Media Audiences in a Changing Media Environment," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 73, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Sigrid Rosteutscher. 2010. "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, 5.

Why Kazakhstan? As I mentioned earlier, there is a scarcity of systematic empirical studies on social capital in Kazakhstan. Moreover, by exploring why there is lower social capital in post-communist Eastern and Central European states than in the West, many scholars omit Central Asian former Soviet Union republics from their analyses.<sup>17</sup> Despite sharing common communist legacy, Central Asian states have local specifics such as neopatrimonialist power mechanisms<sup>18</sup>, clan politics<sup>19</sup> and paternalistic political cultures<sup>20</sup> shaping countries' political and socio-economic development. Studying Kazakhstan, the largest of Central Asian economies, would reveal how these specifics affect the relationship between media and social capital.

Soon after declaring its independence in 1991 the international community was applauding Kazakhstan for giving up its Soviet-inherited nuclear arsenal and taking a democratic path of development. In summing up the initial decade of political reforms in Kazakhstan, Martha Brill Olcott, a prominent expert on Central Asian affairs, wrote: 'economic reform is mired in widespread corruption and a regime that flirted with democracy is now laying foundation for family-based, authoritarian rule.'<sup>21</sup> According to Olcott and many area specialists, Kazakhstan betrayed its promise of becoming a prosperous, egalitarian and democratic state. Instead of making a transition to democracy somewhat similar to Central European and Baltic post-communist states, it has entered a political gray zone, which means that it is 'neither dictatorial nor clearly headed towards democracy.'<sup>22</sup> Of course it has a democratic constitution, frequently held elections, and some room for opposition and civil society, but in essence, according to many international human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Kazakhstan's elections have always fell short of democratic standards, political opposition and independent mass media is often being oppressed and individual civil liberties violated. Presence of democratic principles and procedures only on paper earned Kazakhstan a classification of consolidated authoritarian regime with 6.61 out of 7 on democracy score and a 'Not Free' status by Freedom House in 2016.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner. 2003. *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy* London: Routledge, reprint; Martin Paldam and Gert Tinggaard Svendsen. 2000. *Missing Social Capital and the Transition in Eastern Europe* Department of Economics, Faculty of Business Administration, Aarhus School of Business, reprint.

<sup>18</sup> Erali Paiziev, "Gods of Central Asia: Understanding Neopatrimonialism" (Central European University, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Edward Schatz. 2004. *Modern Clan Politics: The Power of "Blood" in Kazakhstan and Beyond* Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, reprint; Kathleen Collins. 2006. *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* New York: Cambridge University Press, reprint.

<sup>20</sup> Sally N. Cummings, ed. 2013. *Symbolism and Power in Central Asia: Politics of the Spectacular*, Routledge Europe-Asia Studies Abingdon: Routledge; reprint.

<sup>21</sup> Martha Brill Olcott. 2002. *Kazakhstan: Unfulfilled Promise* Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, reprint, Back cover.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Carothers. 2002. "The End of the Transition Paradigm," *Journal of Democracy* 13, 1: 9.

<sup>23</sup> Joanna Lillis. 2016. "Kazakhstan." Freedom House, At <https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2016/kazakhstan>, accessed 7 November 2016.

Having briefly introduced Kazakhstan I now present Taldykorgan as a primary focus of this paper. Taldykorgan is a mid-size city founded in 1868 and located in southeast Kazakhstan. It has a territory of 74 km<sup>2</sup> and populates around 155 thousand citizens.<sup>24</sup> There are more than 70 ethnicities living in Taldykorgan with 68% Kazakhs, 25% Russians and 3% Koreans. It is an administrative capital of Almaty district. The city has advanced education, health and social infrastructure. Taldykorgan Local Government's website – [taldykorgan.gov.kz](http://taldykorgan.gov.kz) – is well designed and visited by 500 users daily. Website offers information on public services, publishes municipal announcements, and offers a 'virtual reception' where website users can post questions addressed to either city mayor or any committee in the local government.

The choice of Taldykorgan as a case study is dictated by two factors. First, it is my hometown. As I mentioned earlier, through frequent visits to Taldykorgan in the last ten years I observed growth of citizens' civic initiatives and political participation. It does not, however, mean that Taldykorgan has more social capital than any other Kazakh city. Nor does it mean that research findings can be generalized to other areas of Kazakhstan. This brings me to the second factor: I noticed strong civic orientedness of *Vechernii Taldykorgan*, which is the most popular regional newspaper. To be able to make generalizations a similar civic-minded newspaper should exist in other areas. After studying various regional newspapers I have not come across any that were similar in stance to *Vechernii Taldykorgan*. Taldykorgan is an interesting case that can demonstrate how a civic-minded regional newspaper affects local social capital.

### Social capital in authoritarian contexts

It would be a sign of major negligence to study relationship between media and local social capital without describing current national social capital in Kazakhstan. For the purpose of this paper I distinguish three types of social capital depending on their context and function (Table 1). In this section I discuss each type of social capital with special attention paid to the hybrid social capital, which prevails in authoritarian regimes. I argue that Kazakhstan possesses a hybrid social capital.

**Table 1: Types of social capital in different political regimes**

Type	Political Regime	Function	Indicators		Political capital
			Associational life	Social trust	
Democratizing	Democratic	Democratize	↑	↑	↑
Non-democratizing	Authoritarian	Stabilize	↓	↑	↑
Hybrid	Authoritarian	Stabilize	↓	↓	↑

<sup>24</sup> Taldykorgan Local Government. 2016. "Homepage." Taldykorgan Local Government, At [http://www.taldykorgan.gov.kz/index.php?option=com\\_smfaq&view=categories&Itemid=150&lang=ru](http://www.taldykorgan.gov.kz/index.php?option=com_smfaq&view=categories&Itemid=150&lang=ru), accessed 7 November 2016.

As can be seen in Table 1, I am using two classical indicators of social capital: interpersonal trust and membership in voluntary associations. For the sake of argumentation, I am also interested in the stock of political trust, or political capital. In line with Kenneth Newton's approach to social capital, I differentiate interpersonal or social trust from political trust, which 'do not have common origins in the same set of social conditions; they are different things with different causes.'<sup>25</sup> Social trust is 'the actor's belief that, at worst, others will not knowingly or willingly do harm, and at best, that they will act in [person's] interests.'<sup>26</sup> Political trust refers to citizens' confidence in parliament and/or government. Contrary to Putnam's argument, Newton's analysis of 42 countries included in 1991 World Values Survey did not find evidence to suggest that 'social and political trusts are close cousins that are born and bred in the same way.'<sup>27</sup> To illustrate, Japan and Finland enjoy high social trust with low political trust; post-communist Poland, Latvia and Estonia, on the contrary, demonstrate high confidence in parliament relative to low levels of social trust.

### *Democratizing social capital*

Democratizing social capital refers to Putnam's classical definition of social capital, healthy stocks of which are supposed to benefit civic engagement and democratic governance. It is found predominantly in democratic regimes. Stimulation of this type of social capital is supposed to make democracies work in both established democracies and countries in transition.

Arrows in Table 1 represent stocks of political and social trust as well as breadth of associational life. Democratizing social capital, according to its classical formulation, consists of highly trusting citizens demonstrating active participation in voluntary organizations and good confidence in government. As the example of Japan and Finland on one hand, and Latvia with Estonia on the other illustrate there may be different configurations of political and social trust. Nonetheless, Putnam and Newton maintain that social trust is a prerequisite for effective political system, which is then able to build up political trust.

It would be naïve to believe that social capital produces only positive consequences. Interplay of its characteristics with various contextual settings revealed its 'dark side.'<sup>28</sup> Take, for instance, Putnam's discussion of two different types of social network: horizontal and vertical. Horizontal networks bring together people of the same status and power, which helps members establish interpersonal trust and cooperation for such mutual benefits as more accountable and responsive government.<sup>29</sup> According to Margaret Levi,

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Newton. 2001. "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy," *International Political Science Review* 22, 2: 201.

<sup>26</sup> ———, "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy," 202.

<sup>27</sup> ———, "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy," 206.

<sup>28</sup> Elinor Ostrom. 1997. "Investing in Capital, Institutions, and Incentives." in: Christopher K. Clague ed., *Institutions and Economic Development : Growth and Governance in Less-Developed and Post-Socialist Countries*. Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press; reprint; Jan W. van Deth and Sonja Zmerli. 2010. "Introduction: Civicness, Equality, and Democracy - a "Dark Side" of Social Capital?," *American Behavioral Scientist* 53, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, 173.

horizontal networks may not necessarily facilitate civic engagement conducive to democratic governance; they may lead to unsocial consequences such as the example of Bosnia and Rwanda demonstrates.<sup>30</sup> Collective action facilitated by networks of similar and like-minded people often leads to such social bads as terrorism, organized crime, and clientelism.<sup>31</sup> Further, speaking of vertical networks, Putnam argues that because these networks incorporate individuals with asymmetric relations of hierarchy and dependency they are incapable of sustaining trust and cooperation.<sup>32</sup> Here too, contrary to Putnam's argument Levi claims that hierarchically organized churches, firms, governments and even Mafia<sup>33</sup> may generate trust, reciprocity and coordination. All of this suggests that one must be careful about the relationship between social capital and democratic governance – a relationship, which is still disputed.<sup>34</sup>

The attractiveness of social capital theory in fixing established democracies pushed many scholars to apply it to the new democracies. Neither Putnam nor his supporters argue that social capital should be alien to non-democratic countries.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, the collapse of the Soviet Union created fertile soil for using social capital concept in democratization discourse to explain why some post-communist countries achieved better democratic outcomes than others.

The reason why some post-communist Central and Eastern European states were more successful in democratic transition than others is related to higher presence of democratic attitudes and active citizenry - what Almond and Verba called as the *civic culture*<sup>36</sup>. Somewhat similar to the social capital concept, civic culture refers to a set of pro-democratic cultural attributes among the public that are conducive to democratic transformations. Without a doubt, social capital or civic culture is only part of the story accounting for successful democratization, others being countries' sufficient economic development, modernization and institutional design. Alternatively, a study conducted by Dowley and Silver found no relationship between social capital and democratization in post-communist countries.<sup>37</sup> They argue that post-communist transitions in ethnically plural societies breed interpersonal distrust among majority and minority groups making the national unity democratic precondition impossible to satisfy. Troubled democratization in these countries seems to be affected by social capital's dark side.

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret Levi. 1996. "Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work," *Politics & Society* 24, 1: 52.

<sup>31</sup> Mark E. Warren. 2008. "The Nature and Logic of Bad Social Capital." in: Dario Castiglione, et al. ed., *The Handbook of Social Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; reprint, 123.

<sup>32</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, 173.

<sup>33</sup> Diego Gambetta. 1993. *The Sicilian Mafia : The Business of Private Protection* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, reprint.

<sup>34</sup> Jan W. van Deth. 2008. "Social Capital and Democratic Politics." in: Dario Castiglione, et al. ed., *The Handbook of Social Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; reprint, 203.

<sup>35</sup> Rosteutscher, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 738.

<sup>36</sup> Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba. 1963. *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* Princeton: Princeton University Press, reprint.

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen M. Dowley and Brian D. Silver. 2003. "Social Capital, Ethnicity and Support for Democracy in the Post-Communist States." in: Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner ed., *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy*. London: Routledge; reprint.

Inspired by the democratizing function of social capital in post-communist states such as Poland and Hungary, numerous international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank<sup>38</sup>, and democracy promotion agencies such as the USAID and Open Society Foundation launched large-scale civil society capacity building programs. These programs were built on a notion that 'in both Western and non-Western countries, in democracies and autocracies alike, individuals who participate in group life are the most supportive of democratic citizenship.'<sup>39</sup> Democracy promotion institutions believe that by fostering social capital they could assist vulnerable societies in dismantling authoritarian regimes by promoting democratic values and supporting civil society initiatives. However, not all scholars tend to share this belief by arguing that link between social capital and democratization may be dubious.<sup>40</sup>

### *Non-democratizing social capital*

Unlike democratizing social capital that is promoted in transition contexts, non-democratizing social capital posits itself in the vitality of authoritarian regimes. Put differently, instead of undermining authoritarian regimes, non-democratizing social capital stabilizes them. Thus, 'the implicit assumption that correlates and relations firmly established on basis of data from democratic countries would just reappear in nondemocratic setting is not correct.'<sup>41</sup> For instance, while in democratic countries social capital boosts civic engagement, which in its turn ensures effective democratic governance, in non-democratic countries social capital may 'reproduce factors that lend support to authoritarian rule more broadly.'<sup>42</sup> Such is the conclusion of Amaney Jamal who studied associational life in Palestine during the Oslo Peace Process (1993-1999).

After analyzing 70 democratic and authoritarian countries included in 2000 World Values Survey, Rosteutscher concluded that 'the effect of social capital on countries' potential for democratization is bad'<sup>43</sup>. Non-democratizing social capital means that both social and political trust and associational life function as stabilizers of authoritarian rule. For example, instead of undermining regime's credibility and legitimacy, trust generates popular support, suppresses regime-threatening forms of protest activity, and nourishes nondemocratic ideals concerning governance.<sup>44</sup> Autocracies are interested in generating this form of

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<sup>38</sup> Vivien Lowndes and Lawrence Pratchett. 2008. "Public Policy and Social Capital." in: Dario Castiglione, et al. ed., *The Handbook of Social Capital*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; reprint, 688.

<sup>39</sup> van Deth, "Social Capital and Democratic Politics," 204.

<sup>40</sup> Ariel C. Armony. 2004. *The Dubious Link : Civic Engagement and Democratization* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, reprint.

<sup>41</sup> Rosteutscher, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 753.

<sup>42</sup> Amaney A. Jamal. 2007. *Barriers to Democracy : The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, reprint, xxi.

<sup>43</sup> Rosteutscher, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 752.

<sup>44</sup> ———, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 752.



social capital because a large number of trusters (high social trust) demonstrate less support for democracy, more confidence in authoritarian regime (high political trust) and prefer to stay away from political participation (low associational life).

Speaking of associational life, voluntary activity boosts public confidence in authoritarian governments and discourages protest activity. According to Jamal, this is because 'ruling governments extend their influence by promoting associational agendas that directly serve their political mandate to the detriment of the general interests of the polity and of basic democratic procedures.'<sup>45</sup> Such dealings with the civic sector created two camps of public associations in Palestine and other non-democracies in the Arab World: those in support of regime and those against. The former, which is the majority of organizations, 'exhibit higher level of interpersonal trust and lower degrees of democratic forms of civic engagement.' The government tries to accommodate these associations by responding to its demands and requests thereby increasing public's political trust. The latter, on the other hand, demonstrate lower levels of social trust and higher political participation. Due to their critical stance toward the regime, these associations face restricted associational freedoms and oppression. As we can see, vibrant associational life in particular and social capital in general does not reinforce only democratic governments; it may also reinforce authoritarian regimes.

### *Hybrid social capital*

What is the nature of social capital in Kazakhstan? Post-communist countries like Kazakhstan, according to Putnam, 'enjoy little social capital, with dire consequences for the quality of governance and democratization.'<sup>46</sup> It is understandable because during seventy years of Soviet rule '[p]eople had been socialized *not to trust their neighbors*. They had few opportunities to participate in civic life' outside 'activities that reinforced rather than challenged the regime'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, Kazakhstan has very low interpersonal trust and poor membership in voluntary associations. By all means, its political culture is far from being *civic*, but rather *subject* – defined by Almond and Verba as political culture where majority of population is aware of political processes, but does not participate in it due to poor political socialization or restrictions on political participation.

Interestingly, while social trust and associational life is low in Kazakhstan, its citizens trust government – a phenomenon that does not match democratizing and non-democratizing social capital characterizations. A study of Russian social

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<sup>45</sup> Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy : The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Badescu and Uslaner, *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Eric Uslaner and Gabriel Badescu. 2003. "Legacies and Conflicts." in: Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner ed., *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy*. London: Routledge; reprint, 219.

capital by Rose and Weller came to the same conclusion<sup>48</sup>. Authors argue that Russians' widespread interpersonal distrust, neutral organizational membership, reliance on anti-modern social networks, and enormous trust in communist-style institutions inevitably produces undemocratic values. It is the sort of social capital that better be decreased in order to foster democratic values.

A 2012 World Values Survey data and comparative work of Sapsford and Abbott<sup>49</sup> show that Kazakhstan has one of the highest levels of citizens' confidence in central government among post-communist republics. This finding resonates with Rosteutscher<sup>50</sup> who confirmed higher trust in government in authoritarian than democratic contexts. Healthy stocks of political trust in the absence of high social trust runs contrary to Putnam's argument, according to which, political trust is a consequence of social trust. This discrepancy seems to favor Newton's argument that political and social trusts have different origins. Had Kazakhstan's social trust been higher, it would have matched authoritarian regimes with non-democratizing social capital.

Like non-democratizing social capital, hybrid social capital consists of low associational life. Through close monitoring and overseeing of civil society organizations, authoritarian governments foster wrong types of associational life aimed at pacifying citizens and generating political trust. Unlike democratic governments that create incentives for citizens to cooperate, Kazakhstan is very much similar to Palestine where 'clientilistic settings structured by vertical political networks create few incentives for citizens to seek out one another in cooperative relationships.'<sup>51</sup> Moreover, protest activity, which under democratic conditions aims to channel public grievances, is almost non-existent in Kazakhstan. All of this leads to citizens' poor participation in voluntary organizations. What about participation in formal political groups such as parties and unions? Rosteutscher found that there is more participation in such groups in authoritarian regimes than in democracies.<sup>52</sup> Political groups are under regime's tight control and act as 'transmission belts to integrate and pacify the citizenry.'<sup>53</sup> Indeed so, Kazakh government actively encourages citizens to join and support state-sponsored political parties and associations such as the 'Nur-Otan' party and 'Atameken' National Chamber of Entrepreneurs.

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<sup>48</sup> Richard Rose and Craig Weller. 2003. "What Does Social Capital Add to Democratic Values? ." in: Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner ed., *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy*. London: Routledge; reprint.

<sup>49</sup> Roger Sapsford and Pamela Abbott. 2006. "Trust, Confidence and Social Environment in Post-Communist Societies," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39.

<sup>50</sup> Rosteutscher, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?."

<sup>51</sup> Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy : The Other Side of Social Capital in Palestine and the Arab World*, 133-34.

<sup>52</sup> Rosteutscher, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 742.

<sup>53</sup> ———, "Social Capital Worldwide: Potential for Democratization or Stabilizer of Authoritarian Rule?," 752.

As we can see from above, Kazakhstan, like Russia, is a unique case with neither democratizing nor non-democratizing social capital. Both countries qualify to be called as countries with hybrid social capital because it does not fully match the theoretical predictions of classical social capital theories. Nonetheless, like a non-democratizing social capital, Kazakhstan's hybrid social capital is playing a stabilizing function of authoritarian rule.

Should we expect the same effect of media on social capital in Kazakhstan as in the western countries? A case of Taldykorgan city should illustrate how readership of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* newspaper affects local social capital. Is *Vechernii Taldykorgan* really contributing to the formation of democratizing social capital, as I originally envisioned, or is it breeding hybrid social capital?

## Methodology

Studying the effect of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* on social capital in Taldykorgan city obviously requires a close examination of newspaper's mission and activities. For this purpose in August 2016 I interviewed its founder and owner, Mr Viktor Bukov.

Newspaper is actively involved in community interest aggregation and articulation via its own Public Chamber. Membership in Public Chamber is voluntary, which means that any citizen of Taldykorgan can participate in the Chamber's weekly public hearings as well as become Chamber's permanent member. In January 2017 I interviewed the head of Public Chamber.<sup>54</sup>

*Vechernii Taldykorgan* often criticizes local authorities for corruption, clientelism, ineffectiveness and unaccountability. To explore the reaction of local government to such criticisms and *Vechernii Taldykorgan*, I interviewed the Secretary of City Council (*Maslikhat*).

*Vechernii Taldykorgan* is the most popular local newspaper. There are other state and non-state newspapers. One such newspaper – *Zheltyi Taldykorgan* (Yellow Taldykorgan) is founded by a journalist, who used to work for *Vechernii Taldykorgan* until 2007. I interviewed her to learn the position of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* on the local media market and see how the newspaper's activity has contributed to dwellers' social capital.

Last but not least, in January 2017 I interviewed heads of two civil society organizations (CSOs): 'Aksakal (Senior Citizens) Council' and 'Taldykorganets' [Taldykorgan dweller] social group on VKontakte social network. Both organizations are actively engaged with local population. *Aksakal* Council helps solve social problems of its members and negotiates with the local government on behalf of senior citizens. The activities of *Taldykorganets* group aim to foster social cohesion, trust and mutual help among city's citizens. It consists of over 87

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<sup>54</sup> With the exception of Mr. Viktor Bukov, all interviewees' identities are anonymised. All interviewees took place in Taldykorgan and lasted for approximately an hour.

thousand online members, who are often involved in local charity campaigns and other social events.

A total of six interviews from various sectors shed light on the local reputation of *Vechernii Taldykorgan*, its activities, agenda, goals and plans. Moreover, interviewees were asked to share their views on levels of social trust, voluntary activity and public's confidence in the government.

## Discussion

The collapse of the Soviet Union and ensuing declaration of Kazakhstan's independence created favorable conditions for the growth of social movements, political participation and civic engagement. Despite deepening socioeconomic crisis people experienced national awakening from seventy years long Soviet tutelage. *Vechernii Taldykorgan* was founded in 1993 during these turbulent times. In words of Mr. Bukov, the rationale behind founding a newspaper was to "bring order and justice in the city", and "awaken citizens by mobilizing them for civic action". Because Kazakhstan was more democratic in early 1990s the newspaper was able to publish much more critical material of regime then than now. According to Bukov, local population is very passive and afraid of standing up against politicians and government. "We are trying to make local population like Americans", says Bukov meaning democratic civic consciousness and engagement of American political culture.

It is worth mentioning that Bukov owns a chain of local supermarkets and grocery stores called *Sattilik* [Welfare]. According to head of *Zheltyi Taldykorgan*, Bukov is a mere businessman who is interested in maximizing his profits. *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is a tool for realizing this objective; it is not designed to "make democrats". By publishing sensational and provocative material, Bukov wants to increase circulation and benefit his business. Head of *Aksakal* Council also emphasizes newspaper's commercial side, which in his words is "far better than its social side". "I don't recognize *Vechernii Taldykorgan* as a serious newspaper because it is not objective and has no analytical component. It is targeted at people dissatisfied with life and power", argues head of *Aksakal* Council. Secretary of City Council also claims that Bukov is exploiting grievances of dissatisfied masses to write only about bad things, "as if there are no positive developments in the city" (*Aksakal* Council).

Both leaders of *Aksakal* Council and *Zheltyi Taldykorgan* newspaper maintain that modern *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is not a people's newspaper, which it used to be in 1990s. "Then", remembers ex-journalist of *Vechernii Taldykorgan*, "there was a popular demand among Taldykorgan dwellers for periodicals...people wanted to read city news. Bukov caught a moment to supply such news along with consumer-oriented content (ads, announcements, consumer rights, etc.). First, we were publishing personal stories of urbanites and then, gradually, we introduced 'Court Cases', 'Crime Scene' and other popular rubrics". A major turn in the newspapers rhetoric and strategy occurred in 2003, when newspaper reached 30 000 copies circulation. "While previously Bukov was teaching people how to live, now he was teaching power how to work", claims head of *Zheltyi*

*Taldykorgan*. She adds that Bukov politicized his newspaper by using such slogans as “*The Power is responsible for growth of traffic accidents in Ili district*” to attack local government. “Bukov got so much carried away by popularity of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* that he abandoned newspaper’s original people orientedness...and fired many journalists who worked for newspaper since 1990s”, claims ex-journalist of his newspaper.

As we can see there are different perspectives on *Vechernii Taldykorgan*. In spite of that, absolutely all interviewees agree that *Vechernii Taldykorgan* remains to be the most popular and widely read local newspaper. Its contribution to city's development is hard to overestimate. According to founder of '*Taldykorganets*' social group and head of Public Chamber, local politicians say that without *Vechernii Taldykorgan* there would have been disorder in the city. “By criticizing local authorities, monitoring and checking on their activities, Bukov’s newspaper is dictating power”, claims head of *Aksakal* Council. To illustrate, in 2014 the newspaper was promoting its candidate to the local legislative body. Furthermore, according to Secretary of City Council, recently Bukov was appointed<sup>55</sup> as an advisor to the local mayor. Both Bukov and head of Public Chamber say that *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is often criticized for being oppositional. Local authorities frequently file libel suits against newspaper. “Even so, authorities reckon with our opinion”, affirms Bukov. How does *Vechernii Taldykorgan* get away from oppression by authorities (a popular practice against independent oppositional newspapers in Kazakshtan)? According to heads of *Aksakal* Council and *Zheltyi Taldykorgan*, “Bukov has connections in Astana”. By connections in Astana both interviewees mean a visit of Dariga Nazarbayeva to Taldykorgan in mid-2000s as part of her parliamentary elections campaign. Bukov assured Nazarbayeva of his support of her *Asar* political party.

Before discussing *Vechernii Taldykorgan*'s influence on local social capital, let us look at existing shape of social trust and civic associationalism. When asked about stocks of social trust in Taldykorgan, Secretary of City Council and head of *Aksakal* Council said that “people are on their own” and do not usually trust people they do not know. Head of *Taldykorganets* social group could not speak for interpersonal trust outside of VKontakte online social network, but argues that group members most of whom are in their twenties have become increasingly “patriotic about Taldykorgan, wishing to help the needy and happy to collaborate”. Head of *Zheltyi Taldykorgan* also hesitated to comment on interpersonal trust per se, but said “people respect each other”. Asked to characterize local social trust, Bukov responded by saying that people are very wary of each other. Both Bukov and head of Public Chamber argue, “Creating more trustworthy citizens is one of the key objectives of *Vecherka*”. Turning to participation in voluntary organizations, Bukov states that citizens are afraid of such activities believing that authorities may somehow punish them or their relatives by causing some problems<sup>56</sup>. Non-politicized voluntary organizations

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<sup>55</sup> It is not clear how he was appointed and by whom.

<sup>56</sup> Authorities use a so-called ‘administrative resource’ to repress dissidents and civic activists. Among threat neutralization tactics are such measures as employment termination and expulsion from university.

and initiatives are said to mobilize many people for mutual help, charity campaigns and flash mobs (*Zheltyi Taldykorgan* and *Taldykorganets*).

As we can see from above, contrary to my original assumption interviewees do not characterize Taldykorgan as a city with high social capital. Neither levels of social trust nor civic associationalism differentiate Taldykorgan from other Kazakh cities. Let us now assess *Vechernii Taldykorgan's* effect on local social and political capitals.

Although interviewees unanimously agree on the positive effect of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* on city's overall development, disagreement exists in relation to newspaper's effect on social trust. Bukov could not assess newspaper's contribution to dwellers' interpersonal trust, but nevertheless said that they [newspaper editorial and journalists] try to deepen public's spirit of mutual aid and trust, thereby creating 'Americans'. *Vechernii Taldykorgan* established a round-the-clock helpline registering and publishing population's complaints and issues; encouraged local communities to organize 'Neighborhood Watches'; introduced free of charge legal support to local population. "If people ask for fish, we don't give them that. Instead we provide them with fishing rods", exclaims Bukov. Through publishing motivational success stories of citizens who managed to solve their problems themselves, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* teaches people to be independent and proactive in solving personal and collective problems. Leaders of *Aksakal* Council and *Zheltyi Taldykorgan*, on the contrary, argue that instead of breeding trust among locals, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is "setting people against each other". "By purposefully provoking clashes and conflicts among local population, Bukov wants to remain above such dramas and benefit his business. Would a newspaper interested in fostering social trust ever do this?" wonders head of *Zheltyi Taldykorgan*. It is difficult to assess newspaper's effect on social capital without having longitudinal survey data on trust. What is evident though is that despite *Vechernii Taldykorgan's* activities to boost local social trust, trust levels remain to be low.

Turning to participation in voluntary organizations, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* has been very active in setting up various voluntary organizations such as City Chess Club, Drivers' Union, Children's Street Football Clubs and Sunday Reading Club. Some of these organizations are designed for children, but others such as Public Chamber and Drivers' Union operate as platforms for citizens' involvement in urban matters. "We created Public Chamber for citizens to voice their concerns and defend their rights. Membership is voluntary, but we have very few *khotelschiki* [wanters] because people are afraid of repercussions", says Bukov. All of the abovementioned organizations were established and are housed by *Vechernii Taldykorgan*. "We are always trying to stimulate people to form associations such as hairdressers' or doctors' associations, but people are so intimidated and businesses are afraid of oppression by local authorities", asserts Bukov. Secretary of City Council argues that organizations created by *Vechernii Taldykorgan* "do not decide anything". Bukov responds to such belief by claiming, "power is not interested in civic associationalism". This claim resonates well with non-democratizing and hybrid social capitals according to which, authoritarian governments fear civic associationalism that can harm their rule.

All in all, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is putting considerable efforts in fostering public initiatives in forming and joining voluntary organizations. Despite such efforts civic associationalism remains as low as the levels of social trust.

What about political trust? Absolutely all interviewees said that local population trusts central government. Trust in the local government is much lower. According to Bukov, the president Nazarbayev is doing and saying the right things, but local authorities are unwilling to realize president's decrees. For instance, several years ago president declared a war on littering. "There are 9,000 members of 'Nur Otan'<sup>57</sup> party in the city, but none of them supports president in this war. The president is lonely in this", says Bukov. A content analysis of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* showed that every current issue of newspaper is filled with 5-8 quotes and photos of president. Newspaper is using extracts of president's speeches and decrees to criticize local authorities for lack of transparency, unaccountability, corruption and ineffectiveness. "I support the president and fear central power", confesses Bukov. This confession of newspaper's owner undermined my original assumption regarding newspaper's desire to develop local civil society. Why does *Vechernii Taldykorgan* support the president and central government if underdevelopment of civil society and violation of citizens' political liberties in Kazakhstan are exactly due to the nature of political regime? "Of everything our president and government do there are both good and bad ideas and policies; we are trying to stick to the good things and policies the central government enacts", maintains Bukov and head of Public Chamber. The latter adds, "I am not ideal in how I run my office, and so is our president. Nobody is ideal". It is worth saying that newspaper started allocating special space for president's quotes five years ago. According to Public Chamber's interviewee, "ensuring public control of local government has become easier with this practice".

According to Newton<sup>58</sup>, healthy stocks of political capital cannot be built in nations lacking social capital; however, as the case of Kazakhstan illustrates, high confidence in government may coexist with low levels of citizens' confidence in others and civic associationalism. Social capital can be fostered both from above and below. States can shape civic capacity<sup>59</sup>, but authoritarian states usually disturb civic development by 'pitting citizens against each other'<sup>60</sup>. *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is trying to boost social capital in Taldykorgan from below. Newspapers such as this one operating in democratic regimes usually contribute to growth of democratizing social capital that leads to political capital. Operating in authoritarian context, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is struggling to 'create Americans'; local social capital is too low to be affected by a single newspaper. Putnam is right in claiming that 'trust will not develop in highly stratified

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<sup>57</sup> A ruling political party with majority seats in the national parliament.

<sup>58</sup> Newton, "Trust, Social Capital, Civil Society, and Democracy."

<sup>59</sup> Sidney Tarrow. 1996. "Making Social Science Work across Space and Time: A Critical Reflection on Robert Putnam's Making Democracy Work" *American Political Science Review*, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Eric Uslaner. 2003. "Trust and Civic Engagement in East and West." in: Gabriel Badescu and Eric Uslaner ed., *Social Capital and the Transition to Democracy*. London: Routledge; reprint; Stolle, "Social Capital."

societies'<sup>61</sup> because 'perceptions of injustice will reinforce negative stereotypes of other groups, making trust and accommodation more difficult'<sup>62</sup>

One particular activity of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* that spoils its image of entrepreneur of democratizing social capital is newspaper's affinity with central government and president Nazarbayev. By publishing Nazarbayev's quotes and photos, newspaper is demonstrating respect, loyalty and admiration for him, thereby encouraging public confidence in the president and government, but not the local government. By demonizing local authorities and honoring central government, newspaper is placing all the blame for failed public policies and reforms on the shoulders of local politicians. In the end of the day, a hybrid social capital is forged with distrusting and non-cooperative citizens, yet projecting significant trust in president and government. While it remains to be seen if *Vechernii Taldykorgan* succeeds to 'create Americans', it is obvious that it is strengthening Kazakhstan's hybrid social capital aimed to stabilize authoritarian rule rather than undermine it.

## Conclusion

Research findings illustrate that 'legacy of communism, with regards to widespread distrust and civic disengagement, is still present, and slow to overcome'<sup>63</sup>. Despite efforts of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* to boost local social capital, Taldykorgan dwellers are apparently not more trusting and associational than dwellers of other Kazakh cities.

As an independent regional newspaper *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is different from similar print media in Kazakhstan. Unlike other 'oppositional' newspapers, this newspaper is criticizing everything, but the president and central government. Support of central government and genuine admiration for president Nazarbayev coupled with permanent attacks on the local government ensured newspaper's survival for more than twenty years. It is not a secret that had it vehemently criticized the president, local and central governments, it would not have survived just like many closed and banned newspapers in the republic.

By emphasizing the rightfulness of central public administration and poor performance of local authorities, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is increasing public's confidence in the president and government. Contrary to my preliminary assumption, *Vechernii Taldykorgan* is stabilizing, rather than undermining current authoritarian regime characterized by hybrid social capital. Unlike newspapers in democratic contexts, which are reportedly fostering social capital by tying citizens together, this Kazakh newspaper is actually untying them and harming development of democratizing type of social capital. For *Vechernii Taldykorgan* to benefit democratization in Kazakhstan, first of all, it has to undermine regime's political capital, stimulate growth of generalized versus

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<sup>61</sup> Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, 88.

<sup>62</sup> Carles Boix and Daniel Posner. 1998. "Social Capital: Explaining Its Origins and Effects on Government Performance," *British Journal of Political Science* 28, 4: 693.

<sup>63</sup> Uslaner and Badescu, "Legacies and Conflicts," 8.



particularized trust, mitigate public's fear of prosecution, continue encouraging voluntary activity and political participation.

Popularity of *Vechernii Taldykorgan* and low social capital among dwellers hints that it is not the frequency of reading a newspaper or its circulation size, but its content that shapes public's levels of interpersonal trust and civic engagement. This runs contrary to a dominant belief that newspaper readership boosts social capital. In authoritarian settings high readership of state-controlled or pro-state newspapers is actually bound to inhibit social capital. *Vechernii Taldykorgan* and its pro-presidential rhetoric is a case in point.

I agree with Newton that there may be different configurations of social and political trust. Like Poland, Estonia and Latvia in Newton's analysis, Kazakhstan is another post-communist country with low social trust, but high political trust. However, based on Kazakhstan's example I rather disagree with Newton and Putnam who state that healthy stocks of social capital are a prerequisite for an effective political system that would then be able to breed political capital. As we have seen political capital in Kazakhstan is not a consequence of social capital. Future studies should explore in greater depth the sources of public trust in Kazakhstan.

Key words: social capital, political capital, mass media, Kazakhstan, *Vechernii Taldykorgan*, democratization