Factors and Trends of Increasing Role of Mass Media in Democratic Elections in Kazakhstan

AKHMETOVA LAILA[1], LIFANOVA TATIYANA[2], VEREVKIN ALEKSEY[3],
SHOROKHOV DMITRIY[4], & LIFANOV SERGEY[5]
[1,2,3,5]Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan
[4]International IT University, Kazakhstan

The article discusses some features of information technologies used by Kazakh media during election campaigns of different years. The purpose of this work is to analyze the peculiarities and factors behind the increasing role of the Kazakh media in the process of democratic elections. The article shows that since 1991-1996 transitional phases, Kazakhstan has been undergoing an intensive procedure of incorporating the media into its constantly evolving democratic set-up and putting up a media monitoring system of the political process in place. Kazakhstan mass media has successfully coped with this task bringing in changes within and taking into account public mentality and technologies at hand. The article presents a comparative analysis of the use of various information technologies in Kazakh election campaigns of different years, with particular attention on the presidential election of 2019.

Keywords: Democracy, elections, Kazakhstan, mass media, political processes, technology

In modern Kazakhstan, as in all democracies worldwide, elections, being the dominant fundamental of the political process, determine the direction and trends of political development. Unlike many Western countries where the tradition of political competition has a long history, Kazakhstan has adapted this process quite quickly. The parliamentary elections (1990) and first presidential (1991) showed to Kazakh people that legitimization of power through the expression of the will of the majority opens a window of possibility for the society to have control over governance through transparency and strength of publicity. Herein comes the role of media in providing channels for identifying and discussing common problems and agreeing on possible ways to solve them. Mass media carry out mutual communication between managers and the managed people, inform the society about actions of authorities, provide an "open rostrum" for expressing opinions of citizens, and maintain a forum for dialogue through the information exchange between the authorities and society (Nysanbaev, Tulegulov, Murzalin&Mashan).

At the same time, it is essential to note that until recently, Kazakh political elites could be quite satisfied with the techniques of campaigning and consent gathering inherited from the Soviet era. However, in a fast transforming Kazakh society, the political elite increasingly feels the need for professional skills of specialists who possess the know-how of social process management. Hence, electoral management and image-building consultant firms and companies are high in demand.

In today's environment, the media has turned out to be one of the essential tools for modern politicking and dissemination of political information. It is observed that both media

and politics work for business, political gimmick, and popularity (Moinuddin, 2015). Media plays the role of a watchdog during Presidential Elections in America (Asghar, Khan, Khuhro, Adnan, & Alqurainy, 2019). However, Farooq (2017) laments those media outlets like WhatsApp are acting as a propaganda tool distorting the essence of communication.

For Kazakhstan and CIS, the leading role of mass media during elections is entirely new. With each successive election, new electoral consulting companies and firms are coming upbringing in new approaches and views, new technologies. Media has almost become an integral part of this venture. *Electoral companies* have become the essential tools for democratizing society and implementing political processes.

Various studies show that not only content but also the nature and strategies of media coverage of the course of election campaigns affect the preferences and expectations of citizens. In today's information society, a journalist or media man becomes a mediator between power, candidates, and voters. The quality of the material, its accuracy, and reality depend on him, as well as the creation of myths and legends for the image of the candidate for deputy or party. It is necessary to note that journalists' professional work contributes to democratic elections and is now in high demand (Akhmetova, 2003).

The purpose of this work is to look into the increasing role of the Kazakh media in the process of holding democratic elections and analyze related peculiarities and factors. The task is to analyze the interaction between the process of forming the institution of free elections in Kazakhstan and the development of independent Kazakh media, keeping at the backdrop the influence of the new economic and political conditions of the country in particular and such common factors like globalization and digitalization as a whole. The novelty of the study is defined by its attempt to understand, in the context of Kazakh reality, not only the role of mass media in the electoral dynamics but also the nature of the use of various information technologies.

Literature Review

The role of media in elections and the political process is quite widely studied, which is, by its very nature interdisciplinary. At the same time, most of the work related to the issue under study belongs to foreign researchers. It is devoted to the analysis of the problem on the experience of Western democracies and international press. The works of E. Toffler, J. Habermas, S. Huntington, E. Noel-Neuman are considered seminal. The conceptual and methodological approaches identified in these works are widely used for empirical analysis of various aspects of media activity during the election period.

The notion is quite common that political consciousness and behavior of people during the election marathon depend significantly on the information field fabricated by the media. The manipulative influence of media on the electoral process is carried out by creating a specific public opinion this way or that way. In such a scenario, two main approaches can be identified, characterizing the degree of influence of the media on the political process.

Proponents of the first approach, older in origin, argue that the media has a significant impact on citizens' political orientations. The theoretical basis of this approach is W. Lippmann's work "Public Opinion" (1922). As a result, the media do not reflect people's perceptions of the world, but create these perceptions themselves, and thus their vision of the world. E. Dennis

(Dennis, 1997), an active supporter of this approach, assumed that the media shaped our thinking, influenced opinions and attitudes, pushed for certain types of behavior, such as voting for a particular candidate. Proponents of the second approach, on the contrary, minimize the degree of the direct influence of the media on the audience due to several mediated factors. They argue that the media merely give a person some information about the political world without affecting his individual political preferences. P. Lazarsfeld, analyzing the influence of the media, concluded that information transmitted to the voter through media channels only reinforces the existing attitudes and orientations (Lazarsfeld, 1940). The active supporter of the second approach, J. Clapper, suggested that the media did not form, but only supported, the political affiliation of voters while developing mechanisms for selective viewing of information, which was becoming a significant barrier to successful propaganda (Clapper, 1960). However, it should be noted that both supporters and opponents of significant media influence on the electoral process cannot exclude the media themselves from the consideration of the political process, but arguing solely about the extent of their impact on the audience, without challenging the existence of such influence.

The role of the media in democratic processes in general, and their direct involvement in electoral processes, is noted at the level of international instruments. At the 1994 OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) Summit in Budapest, participating States recognized the importance of the media clearly and the mandate of ODIHR (Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights) to "play an expanded role in the observation of elections before, during and after elections" (OSCE, 2012, p. 9). During any election, the media provide an invaluable source of information between rivals and the public. By providing a forum for public debate and informing citizens about the programs and platforms of candidates and parties, the media allows voters to make an informed decision when they cast their votes. The importance of this last point cannot be overstated, as the ability of voters to make informed choices is a crucial aspect of democratic elections (Akhmetova et al., 2013).

Studies and researches note that electoral preferences and expectations are likely to depend on media coverage. The style, nature, and frequency of media coverage in the run-up to elections affect voters' preferences and expectations about election results and may even affect voting results (Faas et al., 2008, pp. 300-301). However, it is essential to note that in modern research the object of analysis is not only the fact of the visible influence of information technologies on voter preferences but also the problems of the impact of the media on post-election coalitions (Eberl & Plescia, 2018), long-term party identification (Plescia & Aichholzer, 2017), transparency of procedure choice and combating unfair practices (Vukovic, 2019) and more. One of the research problems is the consideration of the procedures for conducting the election consultancy and the definition and limitation of the functions of the media during this period as per national legislation and public practice.

Thus, the analysis of the primary thematic orientation of the studies allows, first, to highlight what issues can be influenced by the media, and by what means this mechanism of influence is implemented. The impact of new communication technologies on election campaigns and the effectiveness of media-focused campaign strategies more broadly remain constant themes for discussion in political research as well as in media sociology and journalism. Increasingly, the study is not just limited to media and communication, namely their digital components, websites and Internet services, social networks, and much more. Works

also now include an analysis of the impact of social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, etc. on various aspects of elections with examples. The increasing influence of Internet technologies on elections is confirmed by empirical data in multiple countries.

Social media significantly expand possible ways and methods of election campaigning. Even the statement that media influence on voter turnout (Schmitt-Beck & Mackenrodt, 2010) and their sympathies tends to be weaker than that of social media is reasoned.

While in terms of assessing the importance of online news portals and digital media, the opinion of scientists is relatively uniform, regarding the influence of social networks diametrically opposite statements are galore. Hong and Nadler (2012) presented the empirical analysis of the potential impact of social media on the U.S. presidential elections in 2012 based on the determination of correlation dependences between the ratings of candidates and level of the involvement of candidates for the sphere of online and social media. According to the authors, despite the different expectations, the high level of activity in social networks by presidential candidates had a minimal impact on the volume of public attention and the results of elections. However, despite the pluralism of opinions regarding the efficacy of Social Media platforms, Twitter and Instagram remain the objects of research in the context of identifying, predicting, and changing electoral preferences in different countries. Several works present an analysis of the content of election information and election forecasts on Instagram (Schmidbauer, 2018), the use of Twitter to change electoral preferences (Grover, 2019). Through social media analysis, the researchers reveal the impact of the nature of social media discussions through acculturation of ideologies and polarization of voter preferences on voter behavior during elections.

At the same time, it should be kept in mind that the experience of foreign researchers is undoubtedly useful, but cannot be fully applied to the existing domestic reality of Kazakhstan – peculiarities of its political structure and the socio-cultural parameters.

During the political regime of the Soviet period, there was no open sphere of interest in power; hence, the lack of social practice of political participation and competition. The issue of media activity as a factor of influence on political choice has become relevant as society is democratized. Both theoretical and applied research on the role of media as a participant in the organization and conduct of elections in Kazakhstan is in a nascent state. There has been no significant scientific study carried out on the role of media, especially media technologies, in the process of Kazakh elections. The current study is the first of its kind to address this potential research gap in the domain of media technology and political communication in Kazakhstan.

Objectives: This study intends to find out and analyze (i) the factors about the increasing role of the media in the process of democratic elections in Kazakhstan, and (ii) it further attempts at comparative analysis on the use of media technologies over the years in Kazakhstan elections.

Methodology

The current study relied primarily on the results authors' researches and measurements over many years, which allowed summarizing a considerable amount of practical information, text, and video materials on electoral processes presented in Kazakh media, statistical data, and

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Akhmetova Laila (Doctor of Historical Sciences, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan) is a Professor in the faculty of Journalism at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan. Akhmetova L. is a well-known Kazakh historian, academician, and author. Her areas of research interest are advertising, conflict science, public relations, journalism, gender, trade unions, and elections.

Lifanova Tatiyana (Candidate of Philosophical Sciences, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan) is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan. Tatiyana's fields of scientific interests include philosophical issues of communication theory, media and information literacy, philosophy of history, and political philosophy.

Verevkin Aleksey (Candidate of Sociological Sciences, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan) is an Associate Professor of Sociology and Social work at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan. Aleksey's fields of scientific interests include methodological problems of sociological research, media education, sociology of mass media and communication, sociology of terrorism.

Shorokhov Dmitriy (Candidate of Philological Sciences, International IT University, Kazakhstan) is an Associate Professor at International IT University, Kazakhstan. Dmitriy's field of scientific interests includes topical problems of the development of modern Kazakh journalism, the Internet, and contemporary media.

Lifanov Sergey is a trainee researcher in Religious Studies at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan. Sergey's areas of academic interests are problems of virtual reality and religious studies, as well as problems of social media.

Correspondence to: Akhmetova Laila, Faculty of Journalism, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Al-Farabi Street, 71, Almaty 050040, Kazakhstan.