

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on civic activism in Kazakhstan

AUTHORS:

ANNA KLIMCHENKO

VIKTORIYA NEM

KAMILA SMAGULOVA

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Europäische Politik

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I INTRODUCTION

Civil society is the key driver of social change, yet civil society organizations and citizen activists face constraints in many Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan. For years, the notion of citizen engagement in Kazakhstan was conceptualized very narrowly, perceived to exist only with state financial support and the relentless oversight by state authorities. That is one of the reasons why it is believed that citizen engagement is relatively low, non-governmental organizations might not even be sustainable, and there are very limited opportunities for grassroots mobilization of citizens. This perception has changed somewhat during the first power transfer that happened in 2019, when the country's first president Nursultan Nazarbayev stepped down and was succeeded by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. This succession sparked a wave of protests, prompting a rise in political activism in the country.

Citizen activism in Kazakhstan is not a widely explored topic yet. The most recent study about citizen activism in Kazakhstan was conducted in 2020, providing a better understanding of who the civil activists in Kazakhstan are, how they interact with the government and what values they hold (Beyssembayev et al., 2020). One of the products/outputs of that research study was the Activist Map created to boost the visibility of activists and civic organizations and help them connect with each other.

Citizen activists in Kazakhstan are not being supported by the government and remain subject to repressive measures that undermine their efforts to create a diverse and sustainable civic ecosystem in the country. The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these issues, when measures that were ostensibly put in place to protect public health were also used to hinder citizen participation and civic activities, even in cities with a higher concentration of civil society organizations like Almaty, Astana (Nur-Sultan) and Shymkent. Beyond existing tensions between state and civil society relations, funding issues or challenges related to human capital, there has been a significant change in the way civil society organizations had to re-organize their work and adjust to the given circumstances.

At the same time, pandemic has somehow become a driving force for rising civic mobilization. Like in many countries, there has been observed a high level of self-organization of people in terms of collecting medicine or raising money to buy mechanical ventilators. Some activists have even organized crowdfunding to deliver lunches to doctors on the frontline. A crucial role in these activities was played by digital technologies and social media tools, which transformed the nature of civic engagement in pandemic and post-pandemic eras both.

Using this as a starting point, the following research study aims to learn what challenges and constraints activists faced in their work because of the COVID-19 pandemic and what tools they used to overcome them.

I THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Prerequisites for civic activism in Kazakhstan: political culture

There is a relatively small community of activists in Kazakhstan, which can be explained by certain political culture or historic factors. Some might relate this to the post-Soviet legacy or autocratic regime, others would see a lack of trust towards the government or towards potential changes. The visible progress can be observed in political culture in the year of pandemic, when expectations from the government have significantly increased (Youngs ed., 2020). Lack of state capacity in taking actions during the pandemic necessitated civic mobilization in the country.

In this context we can rely on the “political culture” concept of Almond and Verba (1963). According to them, there are three categories of political culture, such as parochial (no participation and no awareness of political processes), subject (awareness with no participation) and participant (democratic, willing to participate) (Almond & Verba, 1963). Thus, political culture in Kazakhstan can be characterized as parochial and subject to some extent, as there is an awareness of political processes with low participation rate. Even if it is hard to measure the

rough population distribution between three groups, there might be an increasing rate of participant culture over the last decade, especially after 2019.

Sairambay (2021) suggested using the “contestant” form of political culture beyond Almond and Verba’s framework, which encapsulates civic culture with attempts of challenging the political order. He characterized Kazakhstan as a less open and more autocratic society in this sense, where contestant culture might become a transitional stage to forming participant political culture. Nevertheless, it might be difficult to determine which of these groups of different political culture might be related with civic mobilization, as one of the forms of political participation. Still, it demonstrates the political environment in which civil society organizations (individual activists and NGOs) need to sustain their work. Sairambay (2021) indicated the Zhanaozen events in 2011 and the protests during power transition in 2019 to be the turning points for transforming political culture.

The given theoretical framework on political culture alongside the main traits of CSO’s observed in the following research enabled us to fill out the gap in the literature. CSOs and civic activism (both on group and individual levels) do form a significant part of political participation and become the major pillars of civil society. Thus, it is important to study how their way of organization and impact have been influenced during pandemic and before.

Online civic activism

Due to constant lockdowns online activism has become more common among CSOs across the world and can be considered an important branch of global civic activism during the pandemic. Sairambay (2021) recalled that online political participation can be seen from signing petitions and using hashtags in social media as common forms of “the Internet activism”. When it comes to CSOs in Kazakhstan, online activism was one of the ways of conducting activities in 2020. At the same time, digital services were not new for certain CSOs even before the pandemic. Namely, emails have been the major means of communication prior to the pandemic (Şen & Şen, 2016). Regarding the pandemic time, it is claimed that Instagram and Twitter were the most useful tools when it came to finding oxygen tools or beds in hospitals. Hence, it is possible to differentiate online activism as a separate phenomenon and as the opportunity to organize work of CSOs during lockdowns.

Activism and COVID-19: the constraints activists faced in Kazakhstan and worldwide

Despite complicated relations between the state and civil society in Kazakhstan, it might be some sort of ideological bias to consider that a lack of democracy leads to low civic engagement, especially during COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has hit all countries regardless of their political regime and has boosted civic activism (Mullojonov, 2021). Whenever governments and entire healthcare systems were unable to handle the rise in coronavirus cases, death rates and constraints in accessing medical care, there was a significant mobilization notice (Zozulya, 2020). In Southeast Asia, for instance, high tech platforms online were created with the help of crowdsourcing to track the COVID-19 cases and monitor vaccination progress (Carnegie Civic Research Network, 2021). At the same time, citizens in Tajikistan, including media influencers and celebrities, reported using Facebook to gather medical help (Zozulya, 2020). Likewise, in Kazakhstan people have created chatbots and adapted messengers to search for and deliver necessary medicines and even mechanical ventilators. It was a general rise in assistance in response to failing autocratic governments in former communist Central Asia and Eastern Europe (Zozulya, 2020).

However, administrative constraints were somehow problematic for the monitoring of civic engagement. The government of Turkmenistan, namely, was reluctant to report cases of COVID-19 (Cherif et al., 2020). Overall, boosting civic participation in hybrid post-Soviet regimes can be explained by ineffective state policies to fight coronavirus (Mullojonov, 2021). What is also important is that no previous literature has been published that reported the rate of civic activism in Kazakhstan and analyzed challenges activists have faced during the pandemic, as existing reports try to capture society as a whole and how it was affected. It makes it more important then to discover and demonstrate potential challenges CSOs and individual civic activists have encountered.

I METHODOLOGY

The methodology section presents the overview of the data collection process: the rationale behind our approach to methodology, design of the questionnaire used during the qualitative data collection and data processing algorithms that were applied to prepare the collected data for further analysis.

In this study we chose a mixed-methods design, which is defined as “a procedure for collecting, analyzing and ‘mixing’ or integrating both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study for the purpose of gaining a better understanding of the research problem” (Ivankova et al, 2006, p.3). Using both quantitative and qualitative data allows for a more comprehensive analysis that is able to compensate for the shortcomings of each research method; namely, that typically neither on its own is sufficient in capturing the nuances and details of the phenomenon that is being researched. For our research purposes, we used the sequential explanatory research design, which means collecting and analyzing the quantitative data first, which is then followed by collecting and analyzing qualitative data that is used to interpret and clarify the results from the quantitative data analysis (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017).

First, an online survey was conducted among independent civic activists and representatives of CSOs from Kazakhstan, consisting of 31 questions total, with some of the questions being open-ended to give the respondents the ability to freely reflect on some of their experiences.¹ The questions were divided into 5 general categories; the first section asked some general information about the respondents or their organization (including year founded, in which regions they are active, in which sphere they mainly work), the second – about possible challenges the activists faced in their work during the pandemic, the third – about their use of digital tools for work purposes, the fourth – about the relationship between activists, the government and society. The questions in the final section were designed to promote and disseminate the survey among the activists. Specifically, the activists were asked to share contact information of other activists to whom we may forward this survey or share the survey with their network directly.

1 A copy of the survey questionnaire is available upon request.

The link to the survey was shared through sending emails or direct messages on social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp), using the database of activists available from the 2020 research on civic activism in Kazakhstan (Beyssembayev et al., 2020). An open call inviting activists to fill in the survey was also posted and promoted on Instagram, Facebook and Telegram. The data was collected for three weeks and stored in the spreadsheet linked to the questionnaire form. A total of 31 responses were recorded.

The final question of the survey asked whether the respondents would be open to participating in the follow-up in-depth interview, laying down the groundwork for the second qualitative data collection step. Since we expected that we would be working with a small and thus likely non-representative sample, the survey was intended to provide us with an overview of the target group's basic characteristics and opinions and a baseline for the selection of interview respondents. From the 31 respondents, 5 people were selected based on the predetermined selection criteria (whether the respondent was part of a registered CSO or worked as an independent activist, whether their work was politically inclined, and whether they worked in a big city or in one of the regions) to participate in the in-depth interview to provide more detailed responses about their experiences during the pandemic. The interview guide consisted of 9 questions.² All of the interviews were conducted over Zoom video-conferencing platform and recorded for transcription purposes with verbal consent of participants obtained prior to starting the recording. After the interviews were finished, the audio was transcribed and coded for further analysis using the software for qualitative and mixed data analysis MaxQDA.

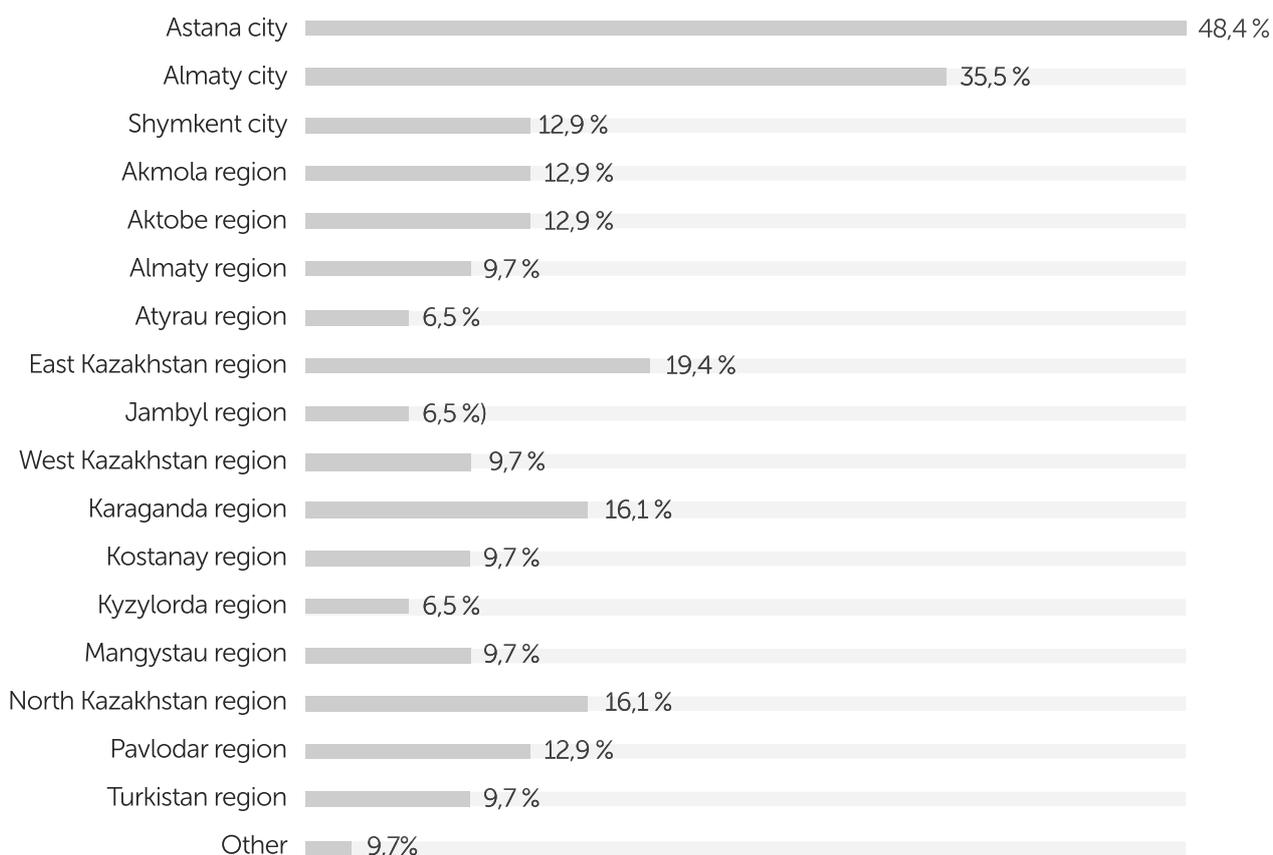
² Available in Appendix 1 [in Russian]

I RESULTS

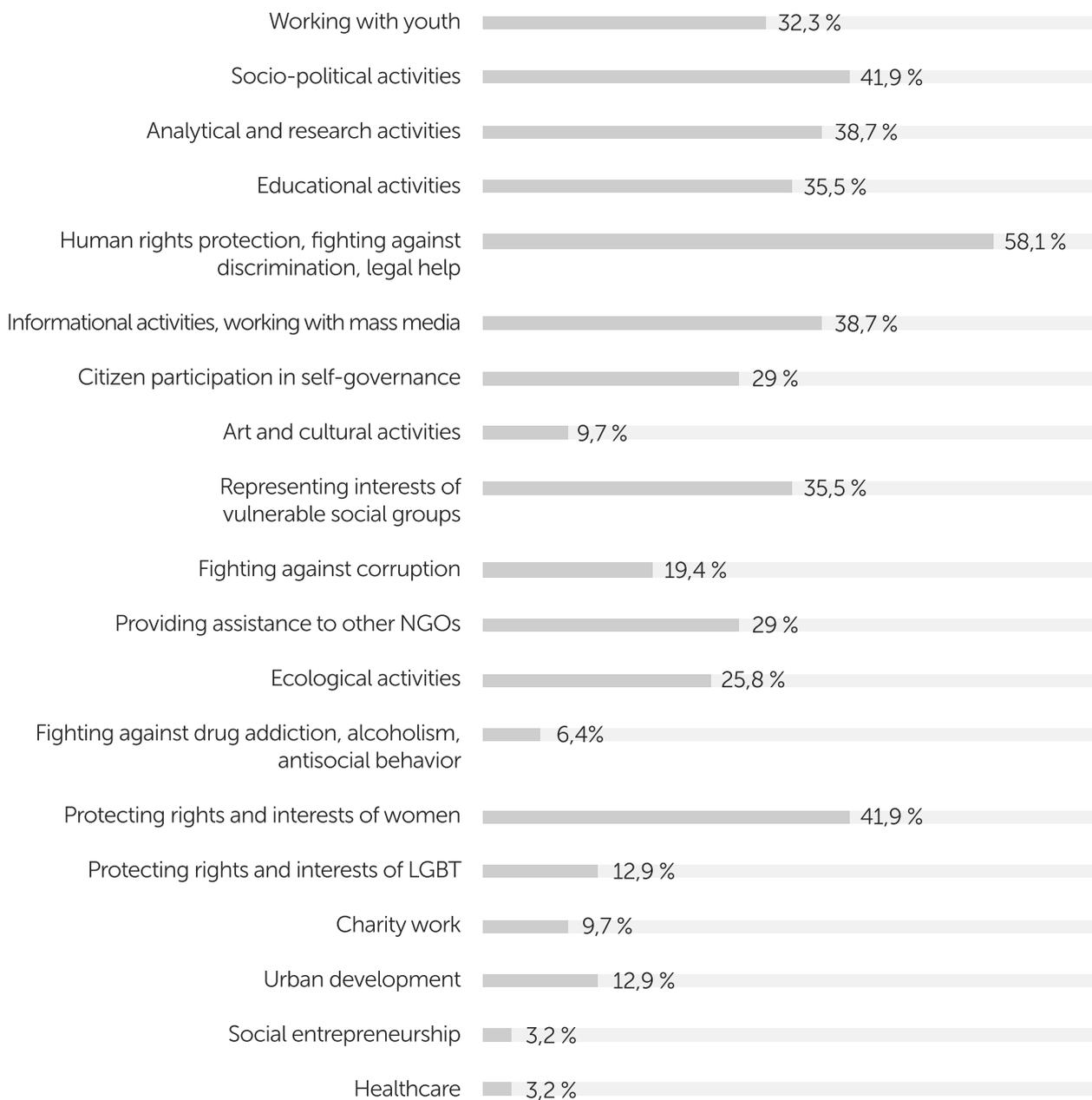
General overview of respondents

The survey has shown that the work of activists and CSOs is mostly focused in Astana (Nur-Sultan) and Almaty cities. Only some of the activists are part of the organizations that implement their activities at the state level.

Figure 1. Geographic spread of Kazakhstani activists (by oblasts and cities of republic significance)



The overwhelming majority of respondents have indicated that they work in several thematic directions simultaneously, the most common being defense of human rights, fighting discrimination and providing legal aid (58%), protecting the rights and interests of women (42%), advocacy of vulnerable groups' interests (36%), protection of LGBTQ rights (13%).

Figure 2. Activists by areas of specialization

Pre-pandemic challenges

Before discussing the challenges that civic activists faced during the pandemic, it is worth examining the problems that arise in their line of work in normal circumstances. From the analysis, looking for funding, emotional burnout and facing pressure from the government were some of the issues that activists experienced prior to the start of the pandemic.

Civic activist teams are already used to **constant quests for financial resources**. In general, NGOs do not have stable financial flow and are mostly funded by implementing stand-alone projects.

To maintain our work we have always needed to contact someone, to sign the agreements, to make proposals for grants and so on. Indeed, the pre-pandemic time was a fight for survival: being able to rent the office, paying salaries and fees.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Для того, чтобы поддерживать свою работу, нам нужно было постоянно с кем-то контактировать, подписывать соглашения, писать заявки на получение грантов и т. д. То есть, по существу, допандемийное время – это борьба за выживание: возможность снимать офис, платить зарплаты и гонорары.

Once a project is finished, there is a need to generate ideas for a new one, which means finding donors and partners who can allocate money for its implementation. Nevertheless, there is always a certain share of unpaid work being required. For example, quite often activists spend unbillable hours of additional work on conducting advocacy campaigns. One of the respondents clarified how initiatives become laws and what role activists play in this process. When the government passes a certain law, it formally motivates it with the ratification of international conventions, whilst in reality an invaluable contribution is made by activists, who have worked for the result and not the money.

There have been three or five years of advocacy by human rights defenders and activists who wrote and sent some reports, organized five hundred different discussion platforms, all without getting paid. It is never mentioned by the government! [...] They would say: 'We have adopted this law because we are ratifying the Istanbul convention!', and that's it. [...] Yet they talk about it as if it was their achievement, like they decided to do this on their own. Although behind this decision there are hundreds of people and hundreds of working hours which were never paid. I have approximately counted for myself: a certain amount of time I work for money, the rest of the time I work pro bono.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Перед этим было три или пять лет адвокации правозащитников и активистов, которые без оплаты писали какие-то там отчеты, направляли, пятьсот дискуссионных площадок провели. Правительством это не упоминается никогда! [...] Они выступают и скажут: «Мы приняли закон, потому что мы ратифицируем Стамбульскую конвенцию», вот и все. [...] А они говорят об этом, как о достижении, как будто они сами решили это сделать. Хотя за их спинами, за этим решением стоят сотни людей и сотни часов работы, за которую никто никогда не платит. Я для себя сделала примерный расчет часов: столько-то часов я работаю за деньги, а столько-то часов я работаю pro bono.

Besides that, it is not always the case that activism is people's main occupation, so for these activities they dedicate their spare time. According to the activists, it might be difficult to combine work and activism, so sometimes they have to settle for just one of those. Participation in social or political activities fueled by pure enthusiasm might lead to depletion of inner resources and result in **burnout**:

I make my living mainly to ensure my minimum. Since it is not that high, I do not find it difficult to make the time for both earnings and public activities. Not everyone manages to combine those, and some face burnout, as they do not have this balance, and they need to focus either on feeding their family or on being involved in activism. This is how the system is built in Kazakhstan, that one excludes the other.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Я зарабатываю чисто для обеспечения своего минимума. У меня он не такой большой, поэтому нет сложности выделять время и на заработок, и на общественную деятельность. Не у всех это получается сочетать, и у некоторых бывает выгорание, потому что у них нет этого баланса, им больше надо думать о пропитании для своей семьи, либо же заниматься активизмом. В Казахстане система так построена, что одно другому, к сожалению, мешает.

Activism is often an unpaid job, so people burn out. It is not even about the comfort, they just get tired of their routine work. Either you need to spend a lot of time to make an impact, or others are rejecting your work and you endlessly confront a negative attitude. You get tired from all that.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Активизм – это чаще неоплачиваемая работа, и люди выгорают. Не то чтобы комфортно или нет, они просто устают от того, что они делают ежедневно работу. Либо нужно много времени потратить, чтобы добиться эффекта, либо у других есть отторжение к твоей работе, и ты сталкиваешься с бесконечным негативом, и ты от этого так же устаешь.

When there is a loss of motivation, it often happens that activists change their field and choose more financially viable jobs with regularly paid vacation.

In addition, one of the main issues for people with active civic position is **impediments from the government**. Such impediments often take various forms based on the type of work a CSO does.

We filed a complaint with the police – the police did not initiate a criminal case. We said that there was a crime there – they said that there was no crime, the person had a phone and could call the police and report that he was being exploited, beaten or sexually exploited. We raised these issues all the time and then [promoted] recommendations to toughen [the criminal code], because it happened in court that cases were closed due to the reconciliation of the parties.

Respondent 15, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Мы подавали заявления в полицию – полиция не возбуждала уголовное дело. Мы говорили, что здесь есть преступление – они говорили, что нет преступления, человек имел телефон и мог заявить о том, что его эксплуатируют, избивают или происходит сексуальная эксплуатация. Мы всё время поднимали эти вопросы, а потом [продвигали] рекомендации, чтобы ужесточить [уголовный кодекс], потому что на суде бывало, что за примирением сторон дела закрывались.

Human rights defenders and political activists have the most strained relations with government agencies. Refusals to hold peaceful protests, accusations of spreading false information, provocations during events, criminal prosecution, attacks by a troll farm³ are just a glimpse of what activists usually deal with.

We came under the supervision of the anti-extremism department in the police department of the city of Almaty, which regularly uses district police officers. They took us to the police department where they either kept us, so that we could not be at the venue of an announced event at a certain time, or they conducted interrogations as witnesses for involvement in the 'Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan' movement that is banned in Kazakhstan.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Мы попали под надзор управления противодействию экстремизму в департаменте полиции города Алматы, которые регулярно в случае проведения мероприятий используют участковых полицейских. Забирали нас, доставляли в департамент полиции, где нас либо держали, чтобы мы не смогли в тот или иной момент находиться в месте проведения какого-то анонсированного мероприятия, либо проводили допросы в качестве свидетелей на причастность к запрещенному в Казахстане движению «Демократический выбор Казахстана».

The current legislation does not enable new political parties to be founded: the procedure for making this happen is so complicated that no one has been able to do it in the past eight years (since 2013). In the legal field there are specific regulations for

³ Troll farms are organizations whose employees use fake accounts to post propaganda comments on social networks. In Kazakhstan, such accounts are called "nurbots".

independent observers as well: under the decree of the Central electoral committee (rus: Центральный избирательный комитет) the photo, audio and video recordings have been prohibited, and the majority of non-governmental organizations lost the rights to observe the parliamentary elections of 2021. Online video streaming from the polling stations was also prohibited.

Cooperating with government agencies, according to the respondents, is not easy, even though many have noted that such cooperation is important to them, especially those who already had such experience prior to the pandemic.

Table 1. The importance of partnership with the government agencies

How important is it for the realization of your activities to have partnership/collaboration with the government?	Did you or your organization have experience working with government agencies prior to the pandemic?		
	No, we did not have such experience	Yes, we had a partnership/collaboration	Total
Difficult to answer	3.23%	3.23%	6.45%
More unimportant than important	6.45%	6.45%	12.90%
More important than unimportant	12.90%	38.71%	51.61%
Very important	3.23%	25.81%	29.03%
Total	25.81%	74.19%	100%

When it comes to the advocacy stage in the activists' projects, government representatives are eagerly listening to their ideas, but that's where it comes to an end:

You engage in a year-long correspondence, discussion platforms, work meetings. And then they still do things the way they want.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Ты вступаешь с ними в годовую переписку, дискуссионные площадки и рабочие встречи. И потом они все равно делают по-своему.

As the respondents explain, the state has a clear division between those activist organizations that they dislike and those they are ready to support. As a result, the CSO community becomes heterogeneous and fragmented.

The authorities have their chosen activists who are pleasing to them, and we, people with active civic position, find it difficult to enter into a dialogue with the authorities, troll farms have been created on social networks to put pressure on activists.

Respondent 2, independent activist, survey quote

Original in Russian:

У власти выборочные активисты им удобные, мы, люди с активной гражданской позицией, с трудом выходим на диалог с властью, в соцсетях созданы фабрики троллей для давления на активистов.

Considering the agenda and public support, we managed to attract media attention, go to courts after refusals, because there was discrimination. Pro-government groups are allowed to simultaneously hold events at the spot we request, and when we go out there the next day, they tell us that construction works are being carried out. Although the day earlier there was a dug hole, and children participated there at an event, and the next day we were told that it was dangerous. You yourself put the children at risk, meanwhile we get refusal.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

С учётом повестки дня, общественной поддержки нам удалось создать резонанс, обратиться после отказов в суды, потому что там была дискриминация. Провластным группам дают одновременно проводить мероприятия там, где мы запрашиваем, а когда мы выходим на следующий день, они нам

говорят, что там проводится ремонт. Хотя днем ранее при наличии выкопанной ямы там проводили мероприятие с участием детей, а нам потом говорили, что это опасно. Сами же подвергаете риску детей, а нам при этом отказывают.

Non-governmental organizations which support the state agenda present significant barriers for the work of independent CSOs. One of the key pressure points here is access to funding: since CSOs are always looking for funds, including ones from government sources, to support their activities, competing with such “state friendly” organizations is often next to impossible.

The presence of pro-state CSOs that receive funding from the government hinders other independent CSOs, deprives them of funding, creates a separate artificial civic society that ignores citizens’ opinions or has a skewed understanding of problems in the society.

Respondent 3, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Наличие ПРОГосударственных НПО, получающих финансирование от государства, мешает другим независимым НПО, лишает финансирования, создает отдельное искусственное гражданское общество без учета мнения граждан или с искаженным представлением о проблемах общества.

One of the respondents explained that this dynamic can be seen even at the level of regional offices of large international organizations because they have vested interest in maintaining good relations with the government to be able to continue their work in the country. Accordingly, unwillingness of such reputable organizations to express a point of view that differs from the government rhetoric in their official reports or other platforms undermines the arguments of independent CSOs that work to change the status quo:

People that work in our UN offices, many of them have a good relationship with the government and support their decisions [...] You can come by the UN Women's office and hear sexist remarks about traditions. And they don't care where they work, they don't care that they are supposed to uphold [certain] values. Besides, they are the ones helping the government write the reports. That is, they either fund the government's reports, or they write the reports

themselves. When we were invited to a meeting by UN Women, they asked: 'Who are your enemies in the country?' I said: 'You are, because you are writing all these reports, you are writing that everything is well. And we are arguing not only with our government, but with you too, because we are sending the complete opposite things!' I told them: 'Start with yourselves.' [...] And usually, when we are meeting with the committees, we talk about this, that these people that work here are not on our side. [...] That's the reason why asking them for help is useless, and we are forced to go to the head committees in order to change anything.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

В наших офисах ООН работают люди, многие из которых с правительством в дружественных отношениях и поддерживают решения правительства. [...] Можно зайти в «ООН-женщины» и слышать сексистские фразы про традиции. Им не важно, где они работают, им неважно, что они должны соблюдать эти ценности. Мало того, они же и помогают государству писать отчеты. То есть, или они финансируют отчеты правительства, либо они сами их пишут. Когда нас позвали на встречу «ООН-женщины», они сказали: «Кто ваши враги в стране?». Я говорю: «Вы, потому что вы пишете эти отчеты, вы пишете, что у нас все хорошо. И мы спорим не только с нашим правительством, но и с вами, потому что мы-то противоположные вещи отправляем!». Я говорю им: «Вы с себя начните». [...] И обычно, когда у нас встречи с комитетами, мы об этом говорим, что эти люди, которые здесь работают, не на нашей стороне. [...] Поэтому к ним за помощью смысла нет обращаться, приходится идти только в головные комитеты, чтобы что-то изменить.

Working during the pandemic

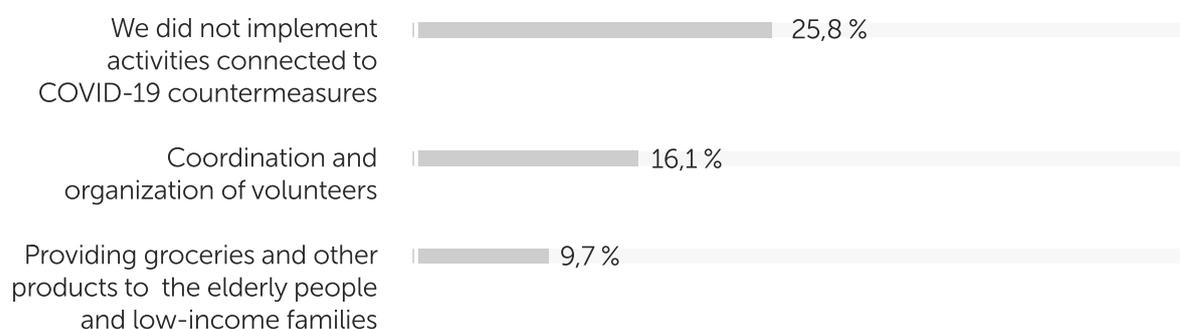
77% of all participants were able to fully adapt to working under conditions created by the quarantine measures. Activists left their offices and switched to work-from-home arrangements. The in-depth interviews revealed that some CSOs had done this before the official lockdown was announced or right after the first registered cases of COVID-19 appeared in Kazakhstan.

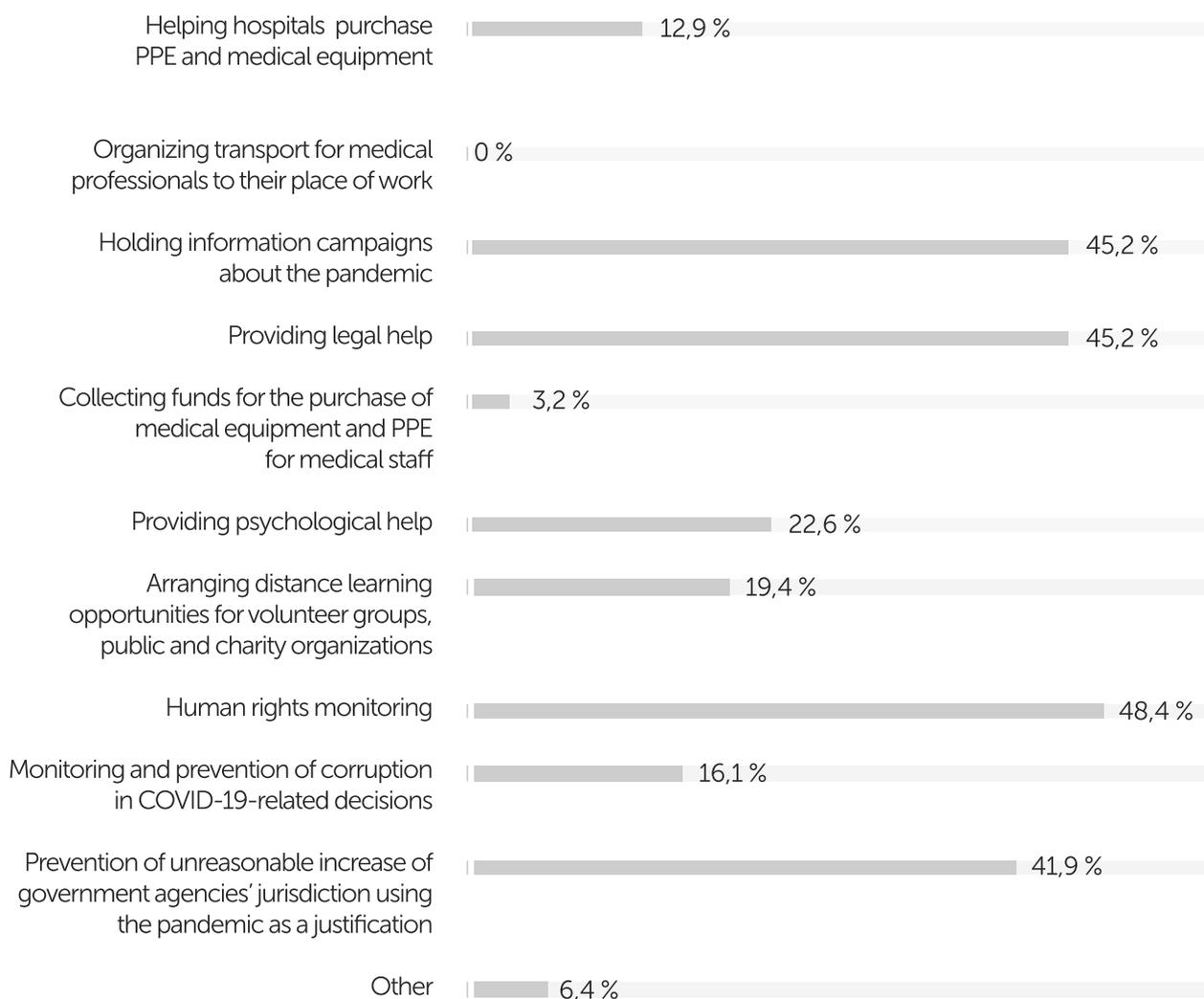
1/5 of the activists (19%) only partially adjusted to the new normal. Planned activities had to be rescheduled with unplanned changes to format, applications had to be modified and the changes were negotiated and confirmed with partners and donor organizations. Some CSOs cut down the number of people working offline to decrease the chances of the virus spreading.

Table 2. Adapting projects to the pandemic conditions

Were you able to adapt your active projects for implementation under the pandemic conditions?	How effective the work of your organization has become under the pandemic conditions?					
	We became a lot less effective	We became a little less effective	Effectiveness did not change	We became a little more effective	We became a lot more effective	Total
No	3.23%	0%	0%	0%	0%	3.23%
Partly	6.45%	9.68%	0%	3.23%	0%	19.35%
Yes, fully	6.45%	9.68%	29.03%	16.13%	16.13%	77.42%
Total	16.13%	19.35%	29.03%	19.35%	16.13%	100%

During the pandemic activists started to offer additional support to the Kazakhstani people and expanded their field of work. The most popular avenues that activists included in their work in that period of time was monitoring of human rights (48%), providing legal help (45%) and providing information and clarifications regarding the spread of coronavirus and precautionary measures (45%). One more important sphere was prevention of unjustified increase in government authority during the pandemic (42%). Less popular were providing help to hospitals in procuring personal protective equipment (PPE) and medical equipment (13%) and providing groceries to senior citizens and low-income families (10%). The following directions were marked down by only 3% of the respondents: collecting funds to purchase PPEs for medical personnel and medical equipment, providing free equipment for sanitizing the premises among the CSOs and initiative groups, organizing daytime hospitals for COVID-19 positive patients.

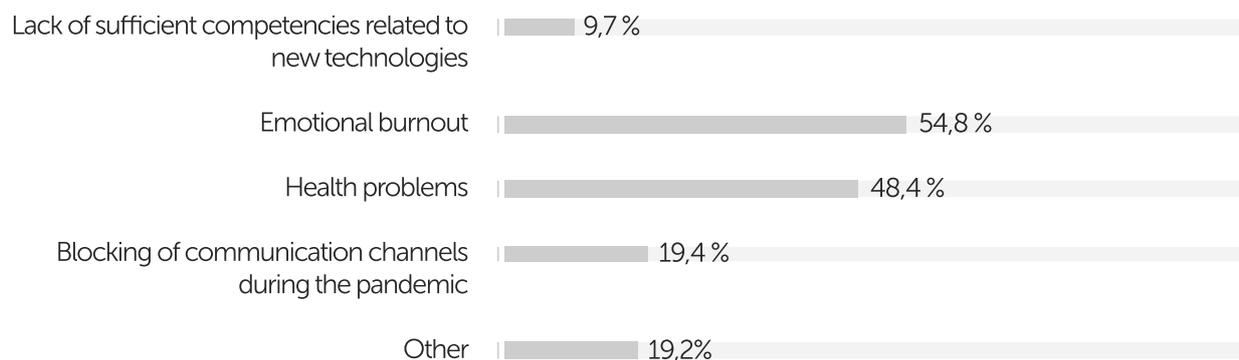
Figure 3. New areas of specialization of activists



The results of the survey showed that for the majority of activists, the following problems became more pressing: completing work obligations (48%), enabling communications within the team (42%) and building relations with the government (39%).

Figure 4. Difficulties in work during the pandemic





Paradoxically, for a quarter of activists (26%), the process of communication within the team and relations with the authorities, on the contrary, became less complicated during the pandemic. 29% of those surveyed estimated fundraising issues to be more relevant for them during the pandemic, and 19% expressed the exact opposite opinion.

Table 3. The impact of the pandemic on different aspects of work

Please evaluate which aspects of your work became more difficult, remained the same or became easier because of the pandemic	Became easier	Remained the same	Became more difficult	Did not have this problem	Difficult to answer
Providing continuous services	16.13%	38.71%	25.81%	19.35%	0%
Fundraising	19.35%	41.94%	29.03%	3.23%	6.45%
Building relations with the government authorities	25.81%	29.03%	38.71%	6.45%	0%
Finishing work obligations on schedule	6.45%	38.71%	48.39%	3.23%	3.23%
Team management	19.35%	41.94%	29.03%	9.68%	0%
Building communications within team	25.81%	32.26%	41.94%	0%	0%

Hardships of working online

Sometimes for the activists it was impossible to build their work processes in the online space, specifically because some of the software was not adapted to be used by people with visual impairment/disability. Shifting to remote mode allowed civic activists to continue realization of their projects but the process was not painless. For example, activists had to deal with **unexpected aspects of running CSOs online**.

In terms of work obligations, documents circulation changed, confusing electronic application forms entered common use, and several partners began to require mandatory participants registration for online events. Such things did not cause serious difficulties but rather some inconvenience. Unforeseen emergencies at work came up due to lack of experience in using unfamiliar technologies:

We planned one event for 100 people but the quantity went beyond: 150 people wanted to participate. We realized that Zoom did not allow us [to include everyone], and we had to switch to Business Zoom for up to 300 people. These were the risks when we did not expect that there would be more than 100 people at our training.

Respondent 15, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Мы планировали одно мероприятие на 100 человек, но вышли за рамки: 150 человек захотели поучаствовать. Мы поняли, что у нас Zoom не позволяет [всех вместить], и мы переходили на Business Zoom до 300 человек. Вот такие были риски, когда мы не ожидали, что будет больше 100 человек на нашем тренинге.

Activists were also hampered by their partners who had to make an effort and required more time to figure out how to handle apps and online platforms more efficiently.

■ **Not all partners and stakeholders have sufficient online skills.**

Respondent 27, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Не все партнеры, стейкхолдеры владеют достаточными навыками работы онлайн.

The same problem arose when interacting with the government sector:

Apparently they didn't have the money to buy Zoom [Pro] because those endless 40-minute calls – you call up for three hours and you have to get reconnected four times. They did not know how to turn the microphone off, I was so sick of it. It takes two minutes to find instructions on Youtube and see how it works. No, they are still managing not to understand how Zoom works and making some elementary errors.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

У них, видимо, не было денег покупать Zoom [Pro], потому что эти бесконечные 40-минутные звонки – ты созваниваешься на три часа, и тебе приходится четыре раза переключаться. Они не умели отключать микрофон, задолбали. Найти инструкцию в Youtube-е и посмотреть, как это работает – это две минуты. Нет, они до сих пор умудряются не понимать, как работает Zoom, и делают какие-то элементарные ошибки.

Some interview respondents also noted that their colleagues who were not used to online distance working were reluctant to employ new digital technologies. They had to deal with rejection of new apps and platforms, which meant resorting to WhatsApp, for example, which Kazakhstanis are accustomed to, instead of other, more suitable for work messengers. One respondent expressed an opinion that such problems were more likely to occur in bigger organizations that worked in fields that did not require extensive experience working with online communication tools.

CSOs with a large number of people (50+), I think, faced such problems [...] But those organizations that even before the pandemic were using the wide selection of online instruments were not only able to continue their work, but also expand it.

Respondent 8, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

НПО, где было большое количество людей (50+), мне кажется, столкнулись с проблемами... А те организации, которые и до пандемии пользовались широким спектром онлайн-инструментов, смогли не только продолжить, но и расширить работу.

As noted by another respondent employed in the field of journalism, their team did not experience any particular difficulties exactly because of the specifics of working as a journalist, who are normally well-versed in using a variety of platforms and applications:

We had a big regional project [...] Our facilitators came to our specially equipped room with all the tech and we connected them. But we were able to do it fast, literally in only a few days. Our schedule shifted, [we had] to send the instructions to facilitators, check how to connect online, because back then it was all very new to a lot of people. And everything worked [smoothly] because journalists are a savvy bunch.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

У нас был большой региональный проект. [...] Наши тренеры приходили к нам в специально оборудованный кабинет с техникой, и мы их подключали. Но мы быстро [справились], буквально за несколько дней. У нас сдвинулось расписание, чтобы отправить инструкцию тренерам, протестировать, как подключаться онлайн, потому что тогда всё это было в новинку для многих. И всё сработало [гладко], потому что журналисты – довольно продвинутые товарищи.

Building the communications within the team in online mode also became more difficult because online tools are unable to provide a way to exchange non-verbal communications to the same degree as in-person conversations. As a result, respondents shared that the occurring misunderstandings were affecting both the quality of work performance and the interpersonal relationships among the team members:

It was hard to switch from offline to online mode. Of course, everyone is working, but it's not entirely clear whether an employee has understood the assigned task correctly, whether he is communicating in the right way with other participants. The first two months we couldn't figure out who was working how. Yes, everyone is doing something but the quality of the work was not clear.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Было сложно переходить с офлайн-режима в онлайн-режим. Понятно, все работают, но не совсем ясно, правильно ли сотрудник понял задачу, которую ему поставили, правильно ли он коммуницирует с другими участниками. Первые два месяца было непонятно, кто как работает. Да, все что-то делают, но было непонятно качество работы.

The internal communications between team members were made complicated by the virtue of the team seeing each other all the time online, and so some team members could overthink or interpret text messages as carrying a negative tone, even though the authors did not intend such meaning. Without non-verbal communication the tension level within the team increased.

Respondent 16, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Внутренняя коммуникация между членами команды осложнилась тем, что команда все время видела друг друга онлайн, и некоторые члены команды могли додумывать или интерпретировать текстовые сообщения в негативную тональность, хотя их авторы не вкладывали таких смыслов. Без невербальной коммуникации уровень напряженности в команде вырос.

In general, **weak feedback systems** were one of the major shortcomings of the online format, which comprises many related factors. Low Internet speed results in bad sound quality and connection hang-ups, which really affects the transmission and perception of information. Connection occasionally failed during court hearings that were conducted online. When the floor was being given to the activists, they noticed it too late: by then the moment was already gone and it was impossible to disrupt court procedure to say what they intended to say.

The involvement level of online audiences of training and lectures was also much lower compared to the level of in-person events that were held before the pandemic. Nowadays event organizers cannot be sure how interested the audience is, whether the participants are listening, if the process was able to draw them in or if they are away from their screens. Additionally, activists observed that during offline events people made introductions easier and were more open to exchange contact information with each other:

I think that online is not as productive for networking, because people don't see each other. We notice it even with our Media School. Participants who attended the same lecture hall for more than three months, went to coffeeshops together, hung out during the weekends. They are friends to this day. Participants from different cities that were in the same chat but didn't see each other, the most they've done is follow each other on social media. That's why, of course, there is a shortage of in-person communications.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Я думаю, что онлайн не такой продуктивный для нетворкинга, потому что люди друг друга не видят. Мы это замечаем даже по Медиа Школе. Ребята, которые ходили в одну и ту же аудиторию больше трех месяцев, потом ходили в кофейни и где-то тусовались на выходных. Они дружат до сих пор. Ребята, которые из разных городов [сидят] в одном чате, но друг друга не видели, максимум подписались на социальные странички друг друга. Поэтому, конечно, живого общения не хватает.

Offline provides full immersion, and for young people this is the key learning factor together with networking that they receive. Online, on the other hand, is more for an adult, professional audience, it works for paid programs where participants need information in any form, be it offline or online.

Respondent 16, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Офлайн дает полное вовлечение – и для молодежи это ключевой фактор обучения, вместе с нетворкингом, который она получает. Онлайн же – больше для взрослой и профессиональной аудитории, это работает для платных программ, где участникам нужна информация – и в любом виде, хоть офлайн, хоть онлайн.

Impact of quarantine

Tightening of quarantine rules naturally limited the work of activist organizations. Work processes were interrupted indefinitely, which necessitated the money flow to reverse:

For me personally during the first pandemic wave the difficulty of work was the cancellation of all [offline] events, and as a result, it became necessary to refund hotels, railway and flight tickets and to other contractors. Within about 8 months I managed to return about 99% of the previously paid money through painstaking work and endless correspondence / phone calls.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Лично для меня на первом этапе пандемии сложность работы заключалась в отмене всех [офлайн] мероприятий, и как следствие стало необходимо осуществлять возврат ранее оплаченных сумм, гостиницам, железнодорожным и авиаперевозчикам и прочим контрагентам. В течении порядка 8 месяцев мне удалось путем кропотливого труда и бесконечной переписки/-созвонов вернуть порядка 99% ранее оплаченных денежных средств.

There were major revisions in the timelines of projects: events were postponed for weeks and in some cases for months. Several CSOs struggled to hold conferences, training and discussion sessions during the weeks when Kazakhstan remained in the “green zone”:

I remember we held a training session in Atyrau. While buying a ticket a week in advance, we prayed that the green zone would be extended. Because if it is a red one, there will be consequences: non-refundable tickets, veering from the schedule. We had training for police officers, we went to another city, to Atyrau, and it was important for us. We accelerated to squeeze into these green zones.

Respondent 15, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Помню, мы проводили тренинг в Атырау. Покупая билет за неделю, мы молились, чтобы всё-таки зелёная зона была продлена. Потому что если красная, это чревато последствиями: где-то невозвратные билеты, это был бы сбой. У нас было обучение сотрудников полиции, мы выезжали в другой город, в Атырау, и для нас это было важно. Мы ускорились, чтобы втиснуться в эти зелёные зоны.

Crisis centers and shelters, where victims of domestic violence and human trafficking were usually housed, were closed because of the quarantine, thereby setting the task for activists to find substitution for these places. People with disabilities were unable to be involved in work as they were prohibited from leaving their homes due to their high risk of contracting the virus. Checkpoints prevented trafficking victims from returning home.

Relations with the authorities

Another serious problem was the **abuse of restrictive quarantine measures by the authorities**, where, under the pretext of an epidemiological situation, they obstructed the work of civic activists, especially organizers of peaceful demonstrations and independent election observers. The former were given a refusal to hold events, and the latter were set the condition that no more than a certain number of people had the right to be present at polling stations. Pressure was also exerted on those who carried out smaller, non-political events at the local level.

They were constantly threatened with quarantine measures, 'If you do this, you will be responsible for gathering people', etc.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Им постоянно угрожали карантинные меры, «Если вы это проведете, будет ответственность за сбор людей» и т. д.

At the same time, it can be said that, even though the government took advantage of the pandemic, they tried not to go overboard with the restrictions:

They play it by ear. In some instances, they can make allowances, because they also need to save face, because the international community is creating pressure. International organizations that watch the realization of human rights in Kazakhstan, they share their position and that strikes at the international image of the republic. We are, after all, a democratic state according to the Constitution, we position ourselves as such, declare it to the world, but in fact there are violations happening. Here they are forced, at the Akorda level, to send

out some instructions on the regional management of domestic policy – now it’s the Community Development Department – to keep at least some balance. In order not to completely slide into dictatorship, but at the same time keep holding the power. Here’s when this choosiness takes root: some are allowed to conduct events, but others are not.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Они смотрят по обстановке. Где-то могут разрешить, потому что им тоже надо сохранять лицо, потому что международная общественность давит. Зарубежные организации, которые следят за организацией прав человека в Казахстане, высказывают свою позицию, и это бьёт по международному имиджу республики. Мы же по Конституции демократическое государство, себя такими позиционируем, объявляем всему миру, но фактически нарушения происходят. Здесь они вынуждены на уровне Акорды рассылать какие-то установки по региональному управлению внутренней политики – сейчас это управление общественного развития – чтобы выдерживать какие-то балансы. Чтобы чрезмерно в диктатуру не скатиться, и в тоже время продолжать удерживать власть. Здесь у них и [возникает] вот эта избирательность: одним можно проводить мероприятия, другим нельзя.

Besides that, interview participants mentioned the coordinated simultaneous attack by the tax authorities on the dozen CSOs across Kazakhstan, the attempts by the sanitary and epidemiological control to banish independent observers into quarantine one day before the parliamentary elections and other provocations:

During the pandemic, when the restrictions were relaxed, we were visited by one boy. We were organizing an offline event with all sanitary norms and hygiene products available, maximum level. This boy came, but he wasn’t on the list. How he got in, I don’t know. After the event he wrote on social media: ‘Attended the event [of this organization], got infected by COVID.’ And trolls started to push and say ‘Look what they are doing! Let’s turn the attention to them.’ We had his number, we tried calling to understand what was happening to him. But the thing is, it’s all bullshit. These people are being sent in to create a negative atmosphere.

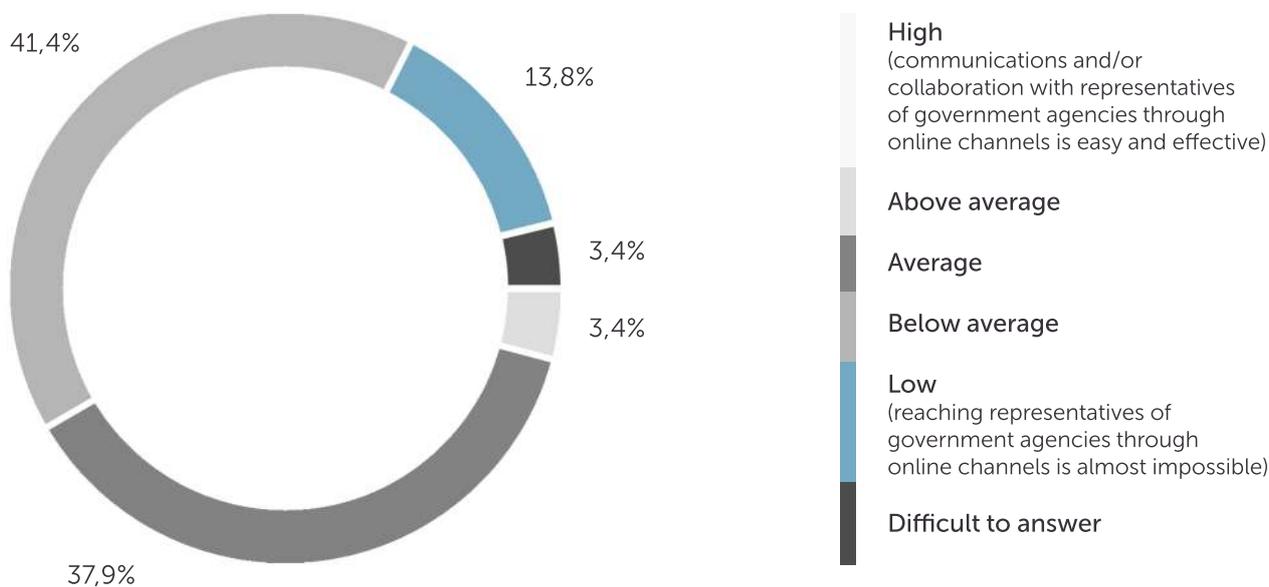
Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Во время пандемии, во время послаблений к нам пришел один мальчик. Мы делали офлайн мероприятие со всеми средствами гигиены и санитарных норм, по максимуму. Мальчик пришел, не был в списке. Как он попал, я не знаю. После мероприятия он написал в соцсетях: «Был на мероприятии [этой организации], и меня заразили COVID-ом.» И тролли начали поддерживать, говорить: «Смотрите, что творят! Давайте обратим на них внимание.» У нас был его номер, мы пытались звонить, чтобы понять, что с ним происходит. Но суть в том, что это полная туфта. Этих людей присылают для создания негативного фона.

Activists also highlighted **weak communications with the government agencies**. The majority of survey participants rated the effectiveness of government communications as only “average” (38%) or “below average” (41%).

Figure 5. Assessment of efficiency level of communication with government agencies



The in-depth interviews revealed that, when the activists tried to build a dialogue and invited government representatives to their online events, they received refusals for the following two most cited reasons. Number one is the priority of the crisis situation in the country over any other problem of Kazakhstan’s society:

During the pandemic, in that first year they did not react to anything at all. Any questions, letters were left without a response, they did not go to any of the calls. They said: 'COVID, people are dying, and here you are with this problem. Yes, of course it's important, but let's wait half a year please. Come on, show some empathy?' And then they started to take calls, use Zoom, organize calls. [...] Our partners wrote a letter to the Ministry of Labor [...] and when they received the letter, they called: 'Are you out of your mind? COVID – and you want us for a week!' A week or five days, it was a big event, they had to connect online. But they said: 'Do you not understand the situation in the country right now? We don't have time for you.' [...] [Representatives] from the other ministries attended, but not the Ministry of Labor. Even though it was an event with participation of the European Union.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Во время пандемии в первый год они не реагировали вообще ни на что. Любые вопросы, письма оставались без ответа, они не ходили ни на какие звонки. Они говорили: «COVID, люди умирают, а вы тут с этой проблемой. Да, она безусловно важна, но давайте подождем полгода, пожалуйста. Ну вы что, не люди совсем?». А потом они стали выходить на звонки, пользоваться Zoom-ом, организовывать звонки. [...] Наши партнеры написали письмо в Минтруда, [...] и когда они получили письмо, они позвонили: «Вы в своем уме? COVID – а вы дергаете нас на неделю!» Неделю или пять дней было большое мероприятие, им надо было подключиться онлайн. Но они сказали «Вы не понимаете, какая ситуация в стране стоит? Вообще не до вас». [...] Из других министерств пришли, а Минтруда – нет. Хотя это было мероприятие было с участием Евросоюза.

The second reason for not attending online events organized by CSOs were the cases of COVID-19 infection among government servants. New precautionary measures were implemented offline: state representatives were refusing meetings with activists, arguing that according to the protocol they were not allowed to see anyone in-person.

By and large, such weakly developed and irregular interaction with the government didn't complicate the work of activists that much. However, because of the distance work regime, the government had more opportunities to exclude activists from participating in decision-making processes:

Public hearings, press-conferences and overall access to the procedures that affect government decision-making at least to some extent – it was very much restricted, although even before this situation in Kazakhstan was, let's say, depressing. That's why during meetings, at the discussions, we and our colleagues in the regions and in Astana raised this question and were saying that now there are no invites to any working groups or public discussions. It's all happening [behind the scenes], and afterwards [they are] presenting some pretty repressive initiative.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Общественные слушания, пресс-конференции, вообще доступ к процессам, которые хоть как-то влияют на принятие государственных решений, очень сильно ограничился, хотя и до этого в Казахстане было с этим, скажем так, печально. Поэтому на встречах, на дискуссиях, мы и наши коллеги в регионах и в Астане поднимали этот вопрос и говорили, что сейчас вообще не приглашают на какие-то рабочие группы, на публичные обсуждения. Все это происходит [куларно], а потом вываливают какую-то очередную довольно репрессивную инициативу.

State of physical and mental health

According to the survey, 55% of activists were affected by **burnout**, which was the most common difficulty during the pandemic. The opinions of those who participated in the survey and the interviews, however, were divided. In the in-depth interviews respondents stated that they themselves did not experience burnout but they did observe it in their colleagues. As a result, the latter were unable to complete work tasks on time. The presence of such exhausted employees was fraught with the emergence of an unproductive atmosphere within the entire team.

Young people have become even more unstable as a work resource: regardless of the workload, even if it is two hours a day, many are in a state of permanent emotional decline. Many [colleagues] tend to bring personal problems to the work area and shatter the whole team with their emotional state, despite the fact that the organization tried to help solve such problems.

Respondent 16, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Молодые люди стали еще более неустойчивыми как трудовой ресурс: вне зависимости от загруженности, даже если она составляет два часа в день, многие находятся в состоянии перманентного эмоционального упадка. Многие склонны переносить на рабочую территорию личные проблемы и расшатывать своим эмоциональным состоянием всю команду, несмотря на то, что организация старалась помогать в решении таких проблем.

As a possible reason for such a state the activists identified the imbalance of professional and personal life that derived from the transition to remote work:

Because they stayed at home with their families, and those who have children, they were completely knocked over, and they began to burn out many times faster. Either it took more time to recover, or they said: 'I'm done', 'I'm broken', 'I can't do this anymore', 'Maybe sometime later'.

Respondent 6, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Из-за того, что они остались дома с семьей и те, у кого есть дети, их совсем накрыло, и они стали выгорать в разы быстрее. Либо нужно было больше времени на восстановление, либо они говорили: «Я все», «Я сломалась», «Я больше не могу этим заниматься», «Может быть, когда-нибудь потом».

Another respondent, on the other hand, emphasized the motivation level of each member of his staff and the ability to adapt to changes, at the same time noting the acute necessity to continue working because finding alternative sources of income during lockdown was seen as impossible. When asked whether in the organization there was someone who was tempted to “throw in the towel” and give up, the activist provided the following response:

Our team is sufficiently stable, psychologically and professionally, so things like that didn't happen. Everyone knows why they are doing what they are doing and keeps working. We should take into account the fact that it is not commercial activities, we are an CSO and we simply don't have a fund to pay for downtime or even involuntary sick leaves. We don't have the budget, and people understand that. Two factors from which we started. The first one – survivability of the organization, the second one – the matter of one's personal employment, to make sure there is a trickle of money during the lockdown, since finding a job in that period of time was virtually impossible.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

У нас достаточно устойчивая команда, психологически и профессионально, так что у нас подобных штук не было. Все знают, зачем они это делают, и работают. Надо отдать должное, что это не коммерческая сфера, а НПО, и у нас тупо нет фонда оплачивать простои и даже вынужденные больничные. Нет бюджета, и люди это прекрасно понимают. Два фактора, с которых мы начали. Первый – выживаемость организации, второй – вопрос своего личного трудоустройства, чтобы ручеек денег шел во время локдауна, так как найти работу в это время было фактически невозможно.

More often, it was not the health problems caused by coronavirus per se that made it difficult for activists to work, but rather **the fear of catching it**. When activists started to experience any symptoms of COVID-19, suspiciousness made them become overly cautious:

Some employees would get afraid, when they felt a scratch starting in their throat. They began to worry and say: ‘It’s possible I caught it, I won’t come in, I am worrying because of this. Maybe I shouldn’t have gone to this or that place.’

Respondent 15, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

У некоторых сотрудников был страх, когда начиналось першение в горле. Они начинали переживать и говорить: «Возможно, что я подхватила, я не приду, я переживаю из-за этого. Наверное, вчера не надо было идти и туда-то, туда-то».

In addition, respondents recalled the feelings of anxiety and responsibility for their employees and beneficiaries. Based on the evaluation of risks, activists self-isolated, put restrictions on offline work of the employees that were in the risk groups, or made the decisions to cancel or reschedule planned events:

When the first flare-ups took place, we thought that it was better to take our time because we might have put other citizens in danger. We ourselves are protected, vaccinated or wearing masks, but someone else may not be that responsible. I don’t want to bear the responsibility for someone’s life and health when there is a way to take precautions and postpone [an event] for later.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Когда происходили первые вспышки, мы думали, что сейчас лучше повременить, потому что мы можем подвергнуть [опасности] других граждан. Мы сами защищены, вакцинированы или же придём в масках, но кто-то может не быть столь ответственным. Я не хочу брать ответственность за чью-то жизнь и здоровье, когда есть возможность предостеречься, отложить [мероприятие] на потом.

In general, any illness experienced during the pandemic took a physical and psychological toll on the activists.

It was March, people were hopped up on hysteria, propaganda about the end of the world. The pandemic of panic is more terrifying than COVID-19 pandemic. Some people simply started getting sick. Seasonal illnesses, common cold and flu, but it all got blamed on COVID. Everyone tried to listen to their bodies and find something worse than COVID, some African swine plague or something like that. Some people were just off because of illness. Plus, the pandemic of panic and fear influenced the psychological condition and adversely affected some people.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

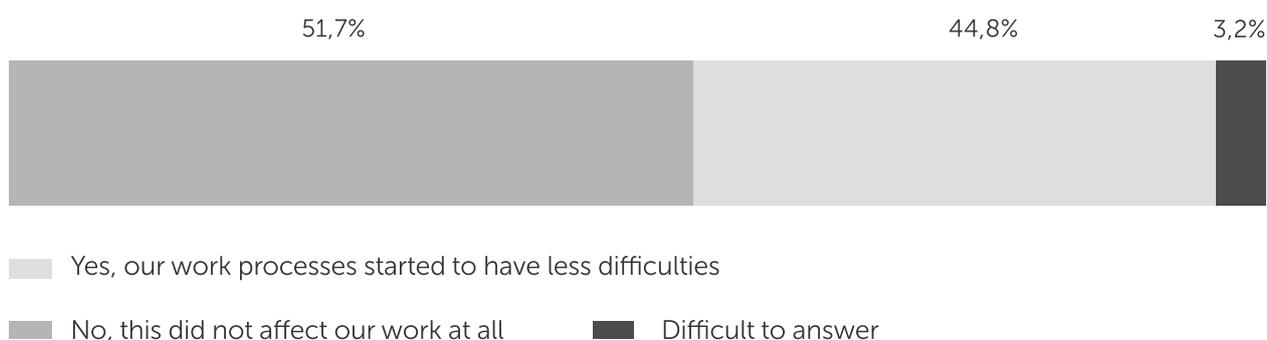
Был март, люди были подогреты истерией, пропагандой о том, что начнется конец света. Пандемия паники страшнее пандемии COVID-а. И некоторые люди у нас просто начали болеть. Причем сезонные заболевания, обычные ОРВИ и грипп, списывали на COVID. Каждый пытался, прислушиваясь к себе, найти что-то страшнее COVID-а, какую-нибудь африканскую чуму свиней или что-то типа того. Некоторые люди просто выпадали из-за болезни. Плюс пандемия паники и страха влияла на психологическое состояние и неблагоприятно сказывалось на некоторых людях.

Unfortunately, coronavirus did not spare either the activists or their beneficiaries. One of the respondents said that there were cases when human trafficking victims asked for help from her organization too late, being already infected with coronavirus, and died before receiving the documents and going home.

Overcoming difficulties during the pandemic

Easing of quarantine measures helped activists to get through all the challenges of the new times only partly: only for 45% of those surveyed work processes became less difficult after the lifting of the state of emergency.

Figure 6. Impact of lifting the state of emergency on the activists' work



As mentioned above, CSOs waited to organize several offline activities until the sanitary and epidemiological situation had improved and Kazakhstan had entered the “green zone”:

We tried to hold all events offline in 2021, maneuvering between quarantines – and the number of participants doubled compared to pre-quarantine times.

Respondent 16, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Мы старались проводить все мероприятия офлайн в 2021 год, лавируя между карантинами – и количество участников увеличилось в два раза по сравнению с докарантинными временами.

In order to maintain productivity, respondents moved to the virtual working space, began to use new technologies to complete work tasks and took additional training or courses.

Activism has become digital but activists' participation in dialogue platforms, working groups and peaceful protests has decreased significantly. Digital technologies have helped activists to overcome geographical barriers in getting information and learning.

Respondent 29, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

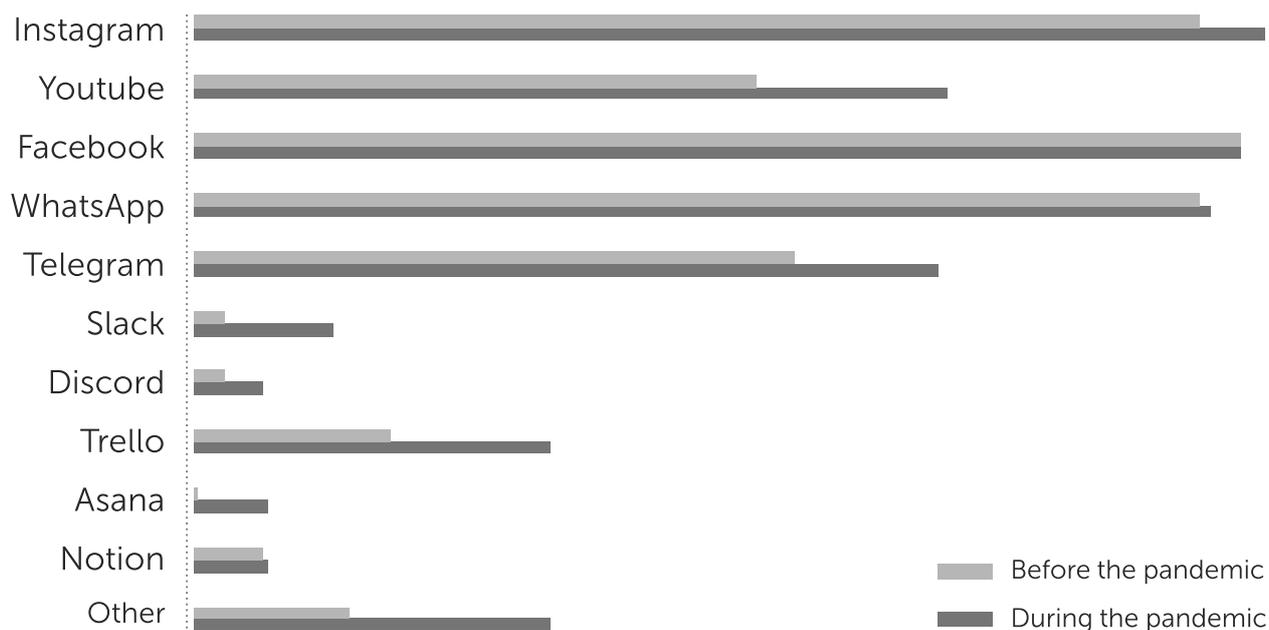
Original in Russian:

Активизм стал цифровым, но участие активистов в диалоговых площадках, рабочих группах, митингов значительно уменьшилось. Цифровые технологии помогли активистам преодолеть географический барьер в получении информации, обучении.

Digital technologies and social networks

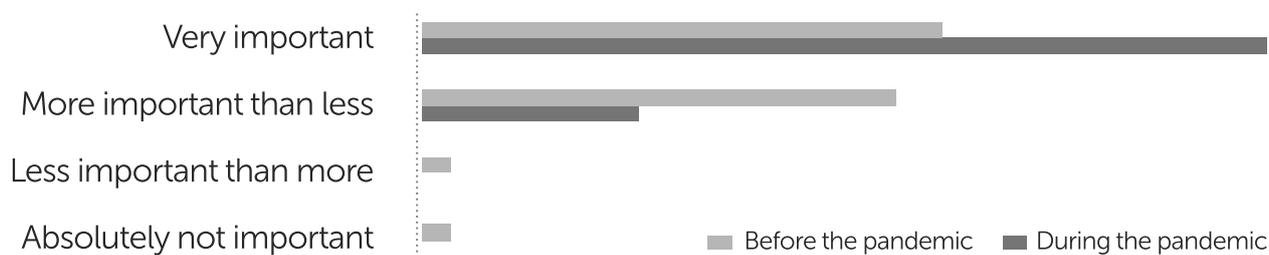
Obviously, most CSOs employed **digital technologies and social networks** even before the pandemic but with its onset 100% of the surveyed activists used them. WhatsApp, Instagram and Facebook were popular tools both before and during the pandemic. The deployment of Telegram, Youtube, Microsoft Teams and Zoom has grown significantly. Of all the applications, respondents considered Instagram the most helpful, followed by Telegram.

Figure 7. Social media platforms and applications used by activists



Phenomenon of mobilizing supporters and raising awareness of citizens about socially significant problems in social networks is not new for Kazakhstani activism but during the pandemic it became especially relevant. According to the survey results, perception of the importance of social media among activists expanded.

Figure 8. The role of social networks and applications at the activists' work



As respondent 25 rightly noted, “social networks have played a crucial role in changing the methods, approaches, ways of fighting in matters of human rights protection in Kazakhstan”. It is possible for everyone to gather a community of like-minded people from all regions of the country due to the Internet platforms. A good example of the rapid mobilization of the society was the environmental public initiative “SOSTaldykol” that aims at preserving the Maly Taldykol lakes located in Nur-Sultan from urban development. The public outcry that has risen since 2020 has not subsided to this day:

And for more than a year now, our community has been asking in social networks and in enquiries to state bodies to help preserve the Maly Taldykol lake group and to sort the situation out. The Kazakhstani media have repeatedly published articles and reports with interviews by citizens and experts. Whenever possible, we all gave our time and participated in clean-up days, races and other actions to attract attention, were active in social networks, wrote appeals, signed petitions, recorded video appeals to President K. Tokayev.

Website of “SOSTaldykol”

Original in Russian:

И вот уже больше года наше сообщество обращается в соцсетях и в запросах к госорганам с просьбами помочь сохранить группу озер Малый Талдыколь и разобраться в ситуации. Казахстанские СМИ неоднократно

публиковали статьи и репортажи с интервью горожан и экспертов. Мы все по возможности уделяли свое время и участвовали в субботниках, забегах, акциях для привлечения внимания, проявляли активность в соцсетях, писали обращения, подписывали петиции, записывали видеообращения к Президенту К.Ж.Токаеву.

CSOs use social media to publicize their activities and promote their civic position but one of the most important functions of social networks is to enable activists to discuss what others are silent about.

Even before the pandemic, digital technologies played a key role in the work of civic activists. In essence, social networks were the only tool before the pandemic and even more so now, as they help to 'break through' the information blockade by providing access to more or less convincing information on human rights issues, compliance with the law and important socio-political projects. In general, in the conditions of modern authoritarianism in Kazakhstan digital technologies mean everything to us!

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Цифровые технологии и до пандемии играли ключевую роль в работе гражданских активистов. По существу социальные сети и до пандемии, и тем более сейчас являются практически единственным инструментом с помощью которого можно «пробить» информационную блокаду при получении сколько-нибудь убедительной информации по вопросам соблюдения прав человека, соблюдения законности, важных общественно-политических проектов. В общем, цифровые технологии в условиях современного авторитаризма в Казахстане – это наше все!

If there is a need to publicize an offense and make the public aware of an injustice that has occurred, news published on online platforms will reach the audience instantly and without censorship. In this way, the CSOs that were affected by the tax attack conducted an online media advocacy campaign, which resulted in gaining international support:

[The journalists] came to the press conferences, they asked the Minister of the Interior very tough questions, and they made sure to cover open public trials as well. We felt support from the journalistic community as there were so many publications of this whole long-term process. The communities united, consolidated among themselves because we received international support from both neighboring countries and far abroad. All major international human rights organizations spoke out firmly, including the European Union and other organizations.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

[Журналисты] приходили на пресс-конференции, они задавали очень жесткие вопросы министру внутренних дел, и они тоже обязательно освещали открытые публичные суды. Мы почувствовали поддержку от журналистского сообщества, потому что было очень много публикаций всего этого длительного процесса. Сообщества объединились, консолидировались между собой, потому что мы получали международную поддержку и из ближних стран, и дальнего зарубежья. Все крупные международные правозащитные организации высказались очень жестко, в том числе Евросоюз и другие организации.

Additionally, the online mode provided CSOs with **opportunities to collaborate and connect with previously unreachable partners**. During the pandemic, some government officials became more accessible to activists. Respondents noted that inviting them to online events had become much easier:

You don't have to ask for leave [at work], you just log in, connect to Zoom, speak and answer the questions.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

На поездку не надо отпрашиваться, тут ты просто зашел в кабинет, подключился к Зум, выступил, ответил на вопросы.

Similarly, experts from other countries and cities have become involved in the projects and activities of Kazakhstani activists more frequently.

Overall, the online format helped many CSOs to stay afloat. 29% of activist organizations were able to maintain their level of effectiveness and 35.5% of them even managed to increase it:

During the pandemic, we had more time and actively started to write applications. We had time to work on it. One way or another, almost all of them worked out.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Во время пандемии у нас стало больше времени, мы стали активно писать заявки. У нас появилось время, чтобы их отработать. Так или иначе, почти все они выстрелили.

Recently, especially during the pandemic, there have been virtually no refusals [to give us grants] because [donors] understand that people are in need, and we understand that we know our resources, we know how to solve the problem. We offer – they support.

Respondent 15, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

В последнее время, особенно во время пандемии, отказов [в предоставлении грантов] практически не было, потому что [доноры] понимают, что люди нуждаются, и мы понимаем, что мы знаем свои ресурсы, мы знаем, как решить проблему. Предлагаем – поддерживают.

Respondents talked about having to mobilize all resources – professional skills, creativity, motivation – to ensure that their organizations could hold out during the coronacrisis and keep working. On the other hand, some activists that experienced burnout were talking about resting, restoring their strength and cutting down on work hours and obligations.

Psychological help and moral support

Activists coped with emotional burnout using counseling services (29%), spending more time with family (16%) and with moral support from their colleagues. Team-buildings and sessions with a psychologist that the activists utilized made a positive impact on their workflow:

We hired a psychologist to work individually with employees, held team-wide training and team-buildings, developed new feedback procedures.

Respondent 16, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Мы нанимали психолога для индивидуальной работы с сотрудниками, проводили командные тренинги и тимбилдинги, прописывали новые процедуры обратной связи.

Close work with a psychologist [helped], as during the pandemic the wave of apathy came over.

Respondent 19, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Тесная работа с психологом, так как в период пандемии нахлынула волна апатии.

We held group psychological sessions, invited different types of councilors which told us how to cope with stress while in online mode and not give in to propaganda and panic.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Мы делали групповые психологические сессии, приглашали психологов разного рода, которые рассказывали, как справляться со стрессом в режиме онлайн и не поддаваться пропаганде и панике.

The support from colleagues, both in regard to professional and personal matters, was yet another important condition that ensured smooth functioning of civic society organizations. If one was caught by the burnout, his or her colleagues would re-distribute the workload until the affected person was able to get back on track. In cases of questions on how to best organize work online, more experienced employees gave helpful technology-related tips, for instance which apps and platforms to use for streaming.

The care that colleagues showed each other was the most valuable during the pandemic. It manifested itself in different forms:

We got together two times a week or once every week and had tea parties on Zoom. We were just chatting: 'How is everyone? Alive and well?' We tried to joke and of course our boss was encouraging us, but also he did worry that we would relax too much and productivity would plummet.

Respondent 13, representative of an CSO pursuing non-political activities, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Мы собирались два раза в неделю или еженедельно, у нас были такие чаепития по Zoom-у. Мы просто общались: «Как вы, живы-здоровы?». Мы старались шутить и, конечно, шеф нас подбадривал, но при этом он переживал, что мы расслабимся и продуктивность у нас упадет.

It became more difficult to organize events online (because most of our partners were experiencing stress). For that we organized weekly calls, had online movie nights, concerts etc. During the calls we were talking about the importance of communication.

Respondent 26, representative of an CSO pursuing political activities, survey quote

Original in Russian:

Стало труднее организовывать мероприятия в режиме онлайн (так как большинство наших партнеров испытывали стресс). Для этого мы организовывали еженедельные звонки, устраивали вечера совместного онлайн-просмотра фильмов, концертов и прочего. На созвонах говорили о важности общения.

Activists also exchanged links to new research on coronavirus in the work chats, talked about common fears and reassured each other. Those who got sick

received fruit care packages, and colleagues were looking for medicine or doctors for them when necessary.

This latter practice was a widespread one among Kazakhstanis in that period: people spontaneously organized help for those in need. Volunteers handed out food packages to senior citizens, low-income families and families with multiple children, put up flyers with information about coronavirus, passed out face masks in places of high gathering, gave food to medical workers to show their appreciation and held other charity events.

One of the positive aspects of the pandemic was that many felt the urge to help others and shared kindness:

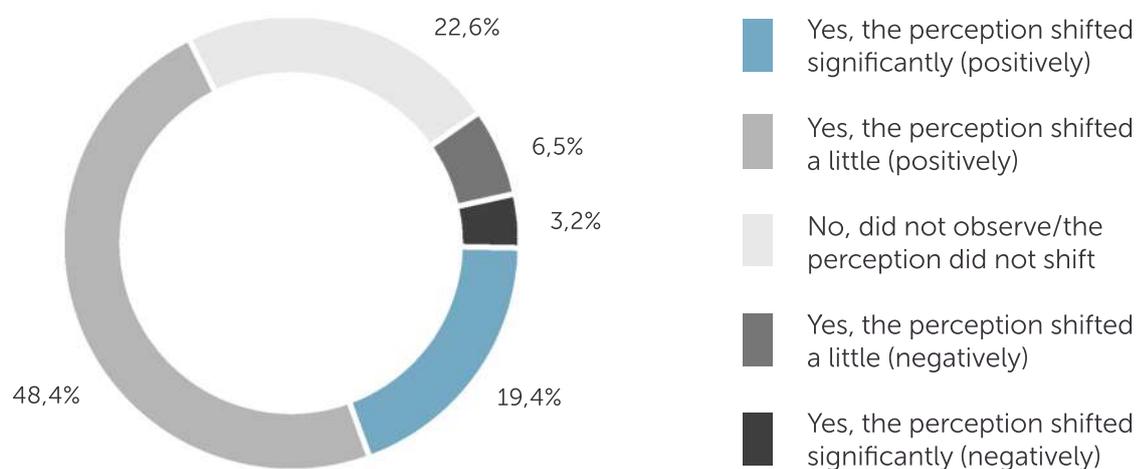
When we had the coronavirus crisis, we gathered and purchased medications, things that were in short supply, groceries and drove out to support medical workers. Here people saw that helping each other really worked and through that found themselves. They felt that part of their calling was to go and support others, receiving inner lightness not only from knowing that you are taking actions, but also from getting feedback from the society. People realized that to give thanks, pay attention to someone's efforts is also important as a source of moral support.

Respondent 25, independent activist, interview quote

Original in Russian:

Когда у нас был коронавирусный кризис, собирали, закупали лекарства, чего не хватало, продукты, ездили поддерживать медицинских работников. Здесь люди увидели, что взаимовыручка работает, и через это нашли себя, почувствовали, что это часть их призвания – идти и поддерживать других, получая и внутреннее облегчение, успокоение от того, что ты что-то делаешь, и плюс ещё отклики от общества. Люди поняли, что благодарить, обращать внимание на чьи-то усилия – это тоже важно в качестве моральной поддержки.

In light of this wave of mutual help, the attitude of citizens towards activism could not but transform. 67% of respondents hold that the way activism is perceived in society has changed for the better.

Figure 9. Changing perception of activism in Kazakhstani society

This conclusion is also supported by the results from Table 4.

Table 4. Impact of the pandemic on activism in Kazakhstani society

	Strongly disagree / Rather disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly agree / Rather agree	Undecided
The COVID-19 outbreak has boosted people's civic engagement	16.13%	25.81%	58.06%	0%
The COVID-19 outbreak showed people their potential and power	22.58%	29.03%	48.39%	0%
The pandemic has increased what is defined as "social capital" in society – human bonds, solidarity, mutual trust	22.58%	29.03%	45.16%	3.23%
A number of community organizations and leaders successfully emerged and became better known to the community during the pandemic	22.58%	38.71%	35.48%	3.23%
New social movements, organizations and leaders emerged during the pandemic	22.58%	29.03%	45.16%	3.23%
The COVID-19 outbreak significantly changed the influence of party-political structures and independent civil society structures	38.71%	32.26%	22.58%	6.45%

I CONCLUSION

The present research study aimed to investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affected citizen activism in Kazakhstan. We were interested in exploring the problems that activists faced because of the pandemic and lockdown conditions, how they adapted their work processes and the tools and approaches they used to overcome these problems.

Our analysis showed that the coronavirus pandemic has presented considerable challenges for both civil society organizations and independent activists. The pandemic not only escalated the problems that citizen activists had to manage prior to 2020, such as issues of funding, loss of motivation due to burnout and lack of effective communication with the government agencies, but also brought forth new obstacles.

First, while switching to the distance mode allowed the activists to continue their work online, it also meant that they had to navigate unfamiliar digital technologies and ensure effective flow of inter-team communication in these digital spaces. In this regard, whether the organization was already familiar with and actively using the online tools such as Zoom made a big difference in how effective they were at going from offline to online mode of work.

Second, quarantine-related measures interrupted some of the regular work processes that were not easily remedied by online solutions: closure of crisis centers or shelters for an indefinite period or work associated with the management of offline events – prior arrangements had to be revisited, timelines shifted, payments returned.

Third, quarantine measures were used by the authorities to obstruct the work of civic activists to an even greater extent, denying peaceful gatherings and other events and limiting the previously allowed access to polling stations for monitoring, citing health concerns.

Finally, the pandemic also presented personal challenges related to physical and mental health of the activists: remote work made it difficult to balance personal and professional aspects of their life and the baseline level of anxiety activists experienced because of the covid fears (catching it yourself or worrying for close friends and family) impacted their productivity.

At the same time, our results showed that the pandemic served as a catalyst for more intensive civic engagement and effective co-operation among civil society organizations which boosted the perception of civic activism in Kazakhstan. Considering that the present research was conducted prior to the events of January 2022, a possible direction for future research thus is to expand the horizon of the analysis and to investigate the newest wave of civic activism in Kazakhstan.

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I APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS (IN RUSSIAN)

Вопросы

- 1 Расскажите, пожалуйста, немного о себе. Кем Вы работаете?
Как давно Вы начали заниматься вопросами гражданского активизма?
- 2 Расскажите, как была устроена работа в Вашей организации/проекте/движении до наступления пандемии? [Работали оффлайн или онлайн? Сколько человек работало вместе с Вами? Как выглядел типичный рабочий день? Какие были обязанности?]
- 3 До пандемии, с какими трудностями в работе Вы обычно сталкивались?
Как Вы решали эти трудности?
- 4 Как изменился Ваш рабочий процесс с наступлением пандемии? Ощутили ли Вы эффект ограничительных/карантинных мер на Вашей работе? Если да, то как именно эти эффекты проявлялись?
- 5 [Follow-up] Как сложно было Вам/Вашей организации подстроить рабочие процессы к условиям/реалиям пандемии? Что именно помогло Вам эффективно организовать работу организации/проекта?
- 6 Скажите, как пандемия повлияла на Вас физически и психологически? Испытывали ли Вы проблемы со здоровьем, тревожность, эмоциональное выгорание, или другие последствия? Как это сказалось на Вашей работе?
- 7 Как Вы справлялись с этими проблемами? Что именно помогло?

Давайте поговорим про государство/влияние государства на Вашу работу во время пандемии.

- 8 Оказывало ли государство помощь Вашей организации/проекту во время пандемии? Обращались ли Вы за подобного рода помощью раньше? Расскажите подробнее.
- 9 Сталкивались ли Вы с ограничениями/препятствиями со стороны государства по реализации Вашей деятельности? [Follow-up: Например, блокировка Интернета/соцсетей, ограничение гражданских прав, иные меры?]

Спасибо за уделенное нам время.

