

Connective Action Against Domestic Violence in Qazaqstan

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On May 13, 2024, Astana Specialized Interdistrict Court for Criminal Cases sentenced the former Minister of Economy Kuandyk Bishimbayev to 24 years in prison for murdering his wife, Saltanat Nukenova, in November 2023. The trial received unprecedented public attention, with hundreds of thousands of viewers tuning in to YouTube channels to follow the terrifying details of the ex-minister's crime. Hashtag activism, including #ForSaltanat and #ChangeTheLaw² campaign, as well as an online petition for the criminalization of domestic violence supported by multiple non-profit organizations and civic initiatives, galvanized the Qazaq digital space. In response to public outrage, in April 2024, President Tokayev signed a string of legislative amendments criminalizing domestic violence.

Why did the policy equilibrium eventually change following Saltanat Nukenova's case? And what was the role of connective citizen actions (hashtag and petition campaigns) in hammering through these changes? In this memo, we argue that connective actions, coupled with President Tokayev's modernizing agenda, sped up the long-awaited legislative changes. While the real effects of the legislation are hard to estimate just a few months after, the campaign itself demonstrated that digital technologies combined with broad public support and modernizing governmental agenda can bring necessary changes even in consolidated autocracies.

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² #ЗаңдыӨзгерт/#МеняйЗакон and #ЗаСалтанат in Qazaq and Russian accordingly.

Legislation on domestic violence in Qazaqstan

Saltanat Nukenova's case was not the first to spark public anger. In 2015, [Svetlana Saduova](#), a teacher from Astana, was doused with gasoline by her husband and burned in front of schoolchildren. In 2016, a well-known producer Bayan Yessentayeva (now Bayan Maksatkyzy) [was severely beaten](#) by her husband, Bakytbek Yessentayev. In December 2020, 29-year-old [Symbat Kulzhagarova](#) jumped from a high-rise building in Astana, accusing her husband of beating her and taking her minor children. These cases provoked governmental and public responses and calls for legislative change, but no significant measures were implemented until the tragic events of November 2023.

Qazaqstan has a convoluted history of legislation against domestic violence and abuse. It began in 2009, when the law criminalizing domestic violence was adopted for the first time following then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev's plea to improve the situation with [human rights](#) in the country. This move was made as a part of Nazarbayev's struggle for international recognition, particularly, his bid for the [chairmanship](#) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The "Madrid Commitments" introduced amendments to a wide range of domestic issues including mass media, elections, and political parties. Although criminal punishment for domestic violence became a part of the National Human Rights Action Plan, the effectiveness of its implementation was questionable. The new legislation focused solely on [punishing](#) perpetrators rather than on preventive measures.

Afterward, however, there were several setbacks: in 2011, the "intentional infliction of minor harm to health" was decriminalized, and transferred to the administrative offenses, which replaced initial punishment (a fine of 50-150 MCI, community service for 180-240 hours, correctional labor for up to a year and arrest for up to 3 months) to the fine ranging 50-300 MCI and arrest up to 45 days. In 2015, the Majlis (the lower chamber of the Parliament) following the case of Svetlana Saduova adopted a new Administrative and Criminal Codes adding criminal liability for "battery" and "minor harm to health". Despite criminalization, domestic violence continued to shake society: in 2016, another high-profile case of domestic violence included the well-known producer Bayan Yessentayeva. This raised further [concerns](#) about the effectiveness of the mechanisms for addressing domestic violence.

Another setback occurred in 2017, when "beating" and "minor harm" were again [transferred](#) to the administrative code. In 2019, the legislators replaced fines for these offenses directed against the family members with warnings instead of fines and arrests. It was partially justified by the cumbersome procedure, which placed the burden of proof on survivors – women, which according to the [Procuracy](#) led to a reduction in the number of registered cases.

In 2019, a new round of discussion started: the bill was drafted by October, and a special working group was established in April 2020 to review it. On September 23, 2020, Majilis [approved](#) the draft in its first reading. On January 21, 2021, President Tokayev called for a review of the draft to consider all opinions, emphasizing the main goal of protecting the rights of women and children. The draft law faced civic [resistance](#); in Astana, Shymkent, Aktau and other cities, people protested against the law, claiming that placed an extensive burden on parents to prevent violence against their children. Eventually, the draft was [withdrawn](#) in late 2022. Later, President Tokayev [announced](#) increased penalties for violence against women and minors in his addresses to the people of Qazaqstan in 2022 and 2023.

“For Saltanat!” Campaign

Discussion about criminalization of domestic violence was galvanized by the string of events in early November 2023: first, on November 1, an Almaty resident Ulzhan [addressed](#) President Tokayev reporting sexual assault against her and alleged subsequent attempts by the police to cover up the perpetrator. A week later, the Public Fund “Nemolchi” (“Do not keep silence”) and Dina Tansari, President of the Fund and human rights activist, published a [video](#) of Moldir Qabylova, the wife of Olzhas Khudaibergenov, a former advisor to the President of Qazaqstan. The video revealed disturbing details about domestic abuse. The “[bloody wave](#)” reached its peak on November 11, when then-Minister of Economy Kuandyk Bishimbayev brutally [killed](#) his 31-year-old wife, Saltanat Nukenova, in a restaurant owned by his family. His arrest and subsequent trial attracted unprecedented public attention, with a nationally representative [poll](#) conducted by the Public Policy Institute in May 2024 showing that 68% of Qazaq citizens followed the case.

Before Nukenova’s case, activists struggled for years to address domestic violence issues. In 2017, the first women's march in Almaty took place without authorization, drawing about 30 participants. Facing the threats from the police, activists recorded a video instead of holding a rally the following year, and in 2019, when their requests for authorization were denied once again, a women's rights rally was held in September. Intimidations and authorization denials [continued](#) but the activists in Almaty managed to get the authorization in 2021 and [gathered](#) 500-1000 participants. In the following 2022 and 2023, the women's marches were denied authorization again, instead feminist groups organized [rallies](#) with up to 1000 participants. In Astana as well, in April 2023 the Myqty Women initiative [organized](#) the first march against violence against Qazaq women.

Being restricted offline, activists complemented rallies with digital repertoire: in December 2020, following the tragic death of Symbat Kulzhagarova, the “Nemolchi” fund initiated a [petition](#) to stop violence against women, addressed to the President and the

Parliament, which gathered more than 130,000 signatures. After Nukenova's murder, the fund released a [statement](#) on the absence of action against domestic violence on behalf of the authorities. Another petition was initiated in February 2021 on Otinish web-platform and [gathered](#) more than 150,000 signatures. Hashtag activism also constituted a part of digital repertoire: on November 12, 2024, a group of feminist activists released a video and started a [flashmob](#) with #МеняЙЗакон and #ЗаңдыӨзгерт (Change the law) hashtags. They called for tightening punishment for rapists via stricter punishment standards and criminalization of domestic violence. Females joined the flashmob with photos and videos that simulated bruises. Another online flashmob, led by PR specialist Leonid Nigmatullin, used the [hashtags](#) #МужчиныПротивНасилия #ЕрлерЗорлыққаҚарсы (Men Against Violence). Male public figures released videos, sharing their statements condemning violence against women.

Digital engagement was further fostered with the decision to broadcast the Bishimbayev trial on YouTube. From March 27 to May 13, the court conducted 48 live [broadcasts](#) of its sessions, accumulating 3.3 million views, indicating significant public interest in this case. Some streams even reached a record number of more than 250,000 viewers. Notably, according to the Court's spokesperson Perizat Sadaukas, [approximately](#) 58% of the audience were viewers aged 25 to 44, and 75% of the audience were women. Capitalizing on public attention to the issue, "Nemolchi" started another online flashmob: on March 3, 2024, it issued the statement, where the fund's President asked to [support](#) Aitbek Amangeldi (Nukenova's brother) with publications under #ForSaltanat hashtag against the backdrop of a media campaign that attempted to denigrate the image of Saltanat, portraying her as psychologically unstable and abusive.

On March 31, 2024, the fund launched a new [flashmob](#) with the headline "If you see me with a glass of wine, it does not mean that I can be killed" referencing Bishimbayev advocates' inquiries about Nukenova's alcohol addiction. Bloggers and influencers [supported](#) the flashmob *en masse* with videos and posts, expressing their discontent with normalization of abuse, and gender stereotypes. The flashmob was also [endorsed](#) by male public figures, including Saltanat's brother Aitbek Amangeldi. In May 2024, media [reported](#) that there were more than 30,000 posts under the hashtag on Instagram, and more than 45,000 on TikTok.

Following the "Nemolchi" initiatives, the Erkindik Kanaty Public Fund [launched](#) a letter-writing campaign to the Senate (the upper Parliament chamber) in April 2024 using the hashtag #ЗаконСалтанат, which emphasized that individual letters could drive legislative change to protect women's and children's rights. Key supporters [included](#) human rights lawyer Khalida Azhigulova, Erkindik Kanaty PF director Elena Shvetsova, Aitbek Amangeldy, Dina Tansari, and media manager Asem Zhapisheva. This campaign took place on eOtinish governmental platform, part of Tokayev's "[listening state](#)"

approach. The use of state-supported platform was intended to increase the public legitimacy of the appeal and became an important part of the connective action repertoire. By April 9, the Senate [reported](#) that they received 5,070 official appeals from citizens of Qazaqstan, as well as public and human rights organizations, in support of the adoption of the law.

Connective actions in authoritarian context

On May 13, 2024, Kuandyk Bishimbayev was [sentenced](#) to 24 years by the jury. A month before, President Tokayev [signed](#) the “Saltanat’s Law”: a series of amendments to multiple pieces of legislation that strengthened the state oversight over domestic abuse and criminalized domestic violence. These changes reflected Tokayev’s agenda to modernize the country announced in his “New Qazaqstan” [speech](#) in September 2022. Despite the modernizing rhetoric, the state continued to restrict freedom of expression: proposals for annual women’s marches and rallies by independent activists in Almaty and Astana in 2024 were denied by *akimats* (municipal executive authorities) due to [fear](#) of public disorder and references to feminist and LGBTQ+ agenda. Instead, the dominant Amanat party and Bibinur Sheraliyeva, founder of the Rahym social house for women left in difficult situations, held a [rally](#) advocating for the “decent life for women”.

Against this backdrop of limited options for offline mobilization, activists developed a robust digital repertoire that connected key civil society organizations, influencers, and ordinary citizens. Hashtag flashmobs, online petitions, and letter-writing campaigns alongside unprecedented audience for Bishimbayev’s trial live streams demonstrated the public demand for justice and new policy equilibrium. Decentralized low-cost connective actions demanding legislative changes in domestic violence resonated well with the political agenda set by the President. While the direct impact of digital activism is hard to assess, its scope definitely helped to keep the issue at the center of legislative agenda and accelerated the pace of the reform.

The room for connective action has been recently expanded with the introduction of the “On Public Control” [law](#), which came into force on April 4, 2024”. The law regulates e-petitions to the government on the [E-Petition](#) web platform, which recently hosted a controversial [call](#) to prohibit “LGBT propaganda”. In other words, the digital sphere is becoming more contentious as conventional political and civic participation instruments such as elections and rallies are tightly controlled. As similar studies have [shown](#), technology might not always function as initially envisioned by activists, but it can still reduce some of the costs associated with collective action, especially in authoritarian regimes.