

I. Bykov<sup>1\*</sup>, X. Li<sup>2</sup>, X. Xie<sup>3</sup>, A. Zhakypova<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russia

<sup>2</sup>Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, Suzhou, China

<sup>3</sup>Longyan University, Longyan, Fujian, China

<sup>4</sup>University of Wollongong in Dubai, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

\*e-mail: i.bykov@spbu.ru

## MEDIA SYSTEM OF KAZAKHSTAN: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON CURRENT TRENDS

Kazakhstan's media system, shaped by a unique historical trajectory and a changing sociopolitical context, represents a critically important field for studying the dynamics of post-Soviet communication spaces. This article presents a methodological analysis of current trends shaping Kazakhstan's media, drawing on the media system theory of Hallin and Mancini.

The primary objective is to systematically identify and assess dominant development vectors, including digital transformation, regulatory evolution, and changing audience engagement practices. A coherent methodological approach to their study is proposed. The study utilizes secondary data methodology, integrating legislative policy analysis and a quantitative assessment of media ownership and market structures. This triangulation allows for a holistic understanding of the complex reality of a system where state influence, commercial interests, and other factors coexist.

The article's key findings center on the limited applicability of Hallin and Mancini's methodology to one of the key aspects of so-called "political parallelism", given the general weakness of civil society institutions in general and political parties in particular. At the same time, the study points to the rapid growth of digital and social media platforms, which facilitate greater information diversity and public discourse, while traditional broadcast media remain under significant institutional restrictions.

A key finding is the emergence of an authorized pluralistic model in Kazakhstan, characterized by calibrated liberalization that allows for economic and technological modernization while maintaining comprehensive political control. The study reveals a persistent gap between formal legal frameworks and their practical implementation, particularly about journalistic autonomy and access to information. The scientific and practical significance of the work lies in its contribution to comparative media studies, offering a nuanced, methodologically sound approach that challenges simplistic dichotomies of "free" and "controlled" systems.

**Keywords:** media system, comparative analysis, Kazakhstan, political parallelism, authorized pluralism.

И. Быков<sup>1\*</sup>, С. Ли<sup>2</sup>, С. Синь<sup>3</sup>, А. Жақыпова<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Санкт-Петербург мемлекеттік университеті, Санкт-Петербург, Ресей

<sup>2</sup>Сиань Цзяотун-Ливерпуль университеті, Сучжоу, Қытай

<sup>3</sup>Луньянь университеті, Луньянь, Фуцзянь, Қытай

<sup>4</sup>Вуллонгонг университеті, Дубай, Біріккен Араб Әмірліктері

\*e-mail: i.bykov@spbu.ru

### Қазақстанның медиа жүйесі: қазіргі үрдістер туралы әдіснамалық ойлар

Қазақстанның медиа жүйесі, өзінің ерекше тарихи жолы мен дамып келе жатқан әлеуметтік және саяси ортасының ықпал етуінен қалыптасқан, Кеңес одағынан кейінгі коммуникациялық кеңістіктердің серпін зерттеудегі маңызды салалардың бірі болып табылады. Бұл мақала қазіргі Қазақстан медиасын құрайтын үрдістерге әдістемелік ойтолғам, және сипаттамалық талдаулардан емес, тақырыпты зерттеуге сай келетін тұжырымдамалық шеңберлерді талқылайтын зерттеу.

Зерттеудің негізгі мақсаты – дамуға әкелетін бағыттарды, оның ішінде цифрлық трансформация, реттеушілік жүйені дамыту және аудитория тәжірибесінің өзгеруін жүйелі түрде анықтау мен бағалау. Оларды зерттеу үшін бірізді әдістемелік тәсіл қолдану ұсынылған. Зерттеуде медиа заңнамасын саяси талдау мен медиа меншіктігі және нарықтық құрылымдардың сандық талдауларының бірігуі арқылы жасалған аралас әдістеме қолданылған. Бұл үш бұрышты талдау жүйенің қазіргі жағдайын, ондағы мемлекеттің ықпалын, коммерциялық мүдделер мен жаңадан қалыптасып келе жатқан мемлекеттік қызмет идеалдарының қатар өмір сүруін толық

Талдау дуалистік ауысу кезіндегі медиа ландшафтың жағдайын көрсетеді. Негізгі тұжырымдар цифрлық және әлеуметтік медиа платформаларының тез өсуін атап өтеді, олар ақпараттық алуан түрлілік пен қоғамдық пікірталасқа жол ашады, ал дәстүрлі теле-радио арналар әлі де айтарлықтай институционалдық шектеулер аясында қалып отыр. Қорыта келгенде, Қазақстанның экономикалық-тұжырымдық жаңғыруға рұқсат берумен қатар, саяси бақылауды сақтайтын үлгіде ерекшеленетін, ресми мақұлданған плюралистік нұсқаның пайда болуы. Зерттеу ресми құқықтық негіздер мен олардың іс жүзіне асуындағы, әсіресе журналистік автономия мен ақпаратқа қолжетімділік тұрғысына қатысты ақаулықтарды анықтайды. Ғылыми және практикалық маңызы – салыстырмалы медиа зерттеулеріне үлес қосу, «еркін» және «басқарылатын» жүйелердің қарама-қайшылығына әдістеме негізінде сәйкес келетін нақты мысал ұсыну. Зерттеу ғалымдарға гибриді медиа тәртібін талдауға мүмкіндік беретін жетілдірілген құралдар жиынтығын ұсынса, қолданушылар мен мемлекеттік саясаткерлерге Қазақстандағы ақпарат жүйесіндегі қалыптасып келе жатқан құрылымдық шиеленістер мен мүмкіндіктер туралы түсінік береді.

**Түйін сөздер:** медиажүйе, салыстырмалы талдау, Қазақстан, саяси параллелизм, санкцияланған плюрализм.

И. Быков<sup>1\*</sup>, С. Ли<sup>2</sup>, С. Синье<sup>3</sup>, А. Жакыпова<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Россия

<sup>2</sup>Сиань Цзяотун-Ливерпульский университет, Сучжоу, Китай

<sup>3</sup>Луньяньский университет, Луньянь, Фуцзянь, Китай

<sup>4</sup>Университет Вуллонгонг, Дубай, Объединенные Арабские Эмираты

\*e-mail: i.bykov@spbu.ru

### Система медиа в Казахстане: методологические размышления о текущих трендах

Медиа-система Казахстана, сформированная уникальной исторической траекторией и меняющимся социально-политическим контекстом, представляет собой критически важное поле для изучения динамики постсоветских коммуникационных пространств. В данной статье представлен методологический анализ современных тенденций, определяющих казахстанские СМИ, основанный на теории медиа-системы Д. Халлина и П. Манчини. Основная цель – систематическое выявление и оценка доминирующих векторов развития, включая цифровую трансформацию, эволюцию регулирования и изменение практик взаимодействия с аудиторией. Предлагается согласованный методологический подход к их исследованию. В исследовании используется методология вторичных данных, интегрирующая анализ политики в области законодательства и количественную оценку структуры собственности СМИ и рыночных структур. Такая триангуляция позволяет целостно охватить сложную реальность системы, где сосуществуют государственное влияние, коммерческие интересы и т.д. Ключевые выводы статьи основываются на слабой пригодности методологии Д. Халлина и П. Манчини в одном из ключевых аспектов, так называемого, «политического параллелизма» в виду общей слабости институтов гражданского общества вообще и политических партий в частности. Вместе с тем, исследование указывает на быстрый рост цифровых и социальных медиаплатформ, которые способствуют большему информационному разнообразию и публичному дискурсу, в то время как традиционные вещательные СМИ остаются под значительными институциональными ограничениями. Ключевой вывод заключается в появлении в Казахстане авторизованной плюралистической модели, характеризующейся выверенной либерализацией, которая позволяет осуществлять экономическую и технологическую модернизацию, сохраняя при этом всеобъемлющий политический контроль. Исследование выявляет устойчивый разрыв между формальными правовыми рамками и их практической реализацией, особенно в отношении журналистской автономии и доступа к информации. Научная и практическая значимость работы заключается в ее вкладе в сравнительные исследования СМИ, предлагая тонкий, методологически обоснованный подход, который бросает вызов упрощенным дихотомиям «свободных» и «контролируемых» систем.

**Ключевые слова:** медиа-система, сравнительный анализ, Казахстан, политический параллелизм, санкционированный плюрализм.

## Introduction

The profound transformation of national media landscapes in the post-authoritarian and digital age presents a compelling challenge for comparative media studies. While established models provide a

foundational vocabulary, their application beyond the Western liberal-democratic contexts for which they were primarily designed requires critical adaptation and methodological reflection. This article addresses the case of Kazakhstan, a nation whose media evolution encapsulates the complex dynamics of

post-Soviet transition, state-led modernization, and the disruptive forces of digital globalization. To systematically analyze this complexity, we employ the seminal comparative framework developed by Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 2012).

The Hallin and Mancini model, with its four dimensions – the development of media markets, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and the role of the state – offers a powerful toolkit for moving beyond simplistic binaries of “free” versus “not free” media as suggested in *Four theories of the press* (Siebert et al., 1956). It invites a nuanced, institutional analysis that considers historical legacies and structural relationships. Hallin and Mancini (2004), in *Comparing Media Systems*, identify three ideal-typical models of media systems based on the relationships among media, politics, and society: the Polarized Pluralist Model, the Democratic Corporatist Model, and the Liberal Model. These models are grounded in comparative analysis of Western media systems.

The Polarized Pluralist Model, associated primarily with Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Greece, is characterized by a high degree of political parallelism. Media outlets are often closely aligned with political parties or ideological positions, and journalism tends to be opinion-oriented rather than information-driven. Newspaper circulation is relatively low, while broadcast media – particularly television – play a dominant role. The state historically exerts strong influence over the media, and professional journalistic norms are comparatively weak or unevenly institutionalized.

The Democratic Corporatist Model, found in Northern and Central European countries such as Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, combines strong state intervention with high levels of media professionalism. This model features a historically significant partisan press that has gradually become more neutral, alongside high newspaper circulation and robust public service broadcasting. The state plays an active but legally regulated role, supporting media pluralism while protecting editorial autonomy. Journalistic professionalism is highly developed, with strong norms of objectivity and self-regulation.

The Liberal Model, typical of countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, emphasizes market dominance and limited state intervention. Media systems are largely commercial, with relatively low political parallelism and a strong commitment to journalistic objectivity. Newspaper

circulation is moderate, and broadcast media are predominantly privately owned. Professionalism is well established, and the media are expected to operate independently from political actors.

Together, these models provide a structured framework for understanding how media systems reflect broader political and social arrangements. However, applying this model to a hybrid regime like Kazakhstan – a context distinct from the Mediterranean, North Atlantic, and Northern European poles of their original typology – necessitates both its utilization and its critical interrogation. Kazakhstan’s media system is shaped by a unique confluence of a strong, patrimonial state tradition inherited from Soviet apparat control, the rapid but often oligarchic development of commercial media markets, and a normative professional culture positioned between Soviet instrumentalism and aspirational Western objectivity.

This study aims to achieve two primary objectives. First, it seeks to provide a systematic, institutional account of Kazakhstan’s contemporary media order, moving beyond event-driven or anecdotal descriptions. Second, and more broadly, it aims to contribute to the methodological debate in comparative media sociology by testing and refining a leading theoretical framework in a critically understudied regional context. The findings promise to illuminate not only the specific path of one nation but also the broader global patterns of media system evolution in an era of democratic recession and digital re-intermediation.

### Literature review

Our literature review deals with sources on the topic and published in English only. However, scholarship on Kazakhstan’s media system has tended to examine discrete sectors or phenomena rather than the media system as an integrated whole. Research on media system of Kazakhstan has developed unevenly, with a predominant focus on individual components of the system rather than on its overall structural logic and interdependencies. Much of the existing literature adopts a sectoral or thematic approach, analyzing specific media types, technologies, or practices in isolation.

For instance, Zhanabekova et al. (2015) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the development of mass media in Kazakhstan, while Ibrayeva et al. (2012) discuss how radio in Kazakhstan transformed after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of market-oriented independent

states. Also, Alzhanova and Yerkimbay (2013) examine the evolution of radio broadcasting since independence, providing valuable historical insight into institutional change and programming practices, yet without situating radio within a broader, system-level analysis of media–state–market relations. Similarly, Shyngyssova and Skripnikova (2021) focus on trends in tabloid journalism, highlighting stylistic shifts and commercialization processes in print media, but stopping short of linking these developments to transformations across the wider media ecology.

The rise of digitalization has further reinforced this fragmented analytical pattern. Studies such as Beisembayeva et al. (2013) address social media and online activism as a distinct sphere, emphasizing its political implications and potential to challenge authoritarian governance. While this work contributes significantly to understanding digital media’s societal role, it treats online platforms largely as an autonomous domain rather than as part of an integrated media system shaped by shared regulatory, economic, and cultural constraints. In a similar vein, Barlybayeva and Ayapbergenova (2025) frame digital media primarily through the lens of national innovation and development policy, aligning media transformation with the broader “Digital Kazakhstan” agenda, but without systematically assessing how digitalization reconfigures relationships among traditional media, state control, and audiences.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate a rich body of empirical and thematic research, yet also reveal a notable gap in holistic, system-oriented analyses. The emphasis on particular media sectors – radio, tabloid press, social media, or digital infrastructure – has limited the development of comprehensive models that conceptualize Kazakhstan’s media as an interconnected system. As a result, the field would benefit from more integrative theoretical frameworks that move beyond segmented case studies to capture the structural coherence, power dynamics, and systemic evolution of the Kazakhstani media landscape as a whole.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlighted that no single model can completely capture the complexity of post-Soviet media landscapes, urging scholars to adapt the original framework to account for hybridity, authoritarian legacies, and the interplay between formal institutions and informal practices. In his later reflections, Hallin (2012) further emphasized the need to move beyond the Western-centric typology and incorporate “peripheral” systems, such as those in post-communist and Central Asian states,

where state control coexists with market pressures and digital disruption.

This systematic directive has been particularly relevant for Kazakhstan, where the media system transcends categorization. The emphasis on changing the model to fit a unique history allows for the refinement of Hallin and Mancini’s framework in the Kazakhstani context, revealing both continuities with the “democratic-corporatist” and “polarized-pluralist” models as well as extraordinary variations. Vesterbye (2023) argues that Kazakhstan’s media system should be understood as a “competitive authoritarian” model with strong state capture, where formal pluralism and private ownership masks deep political control. He proposes an altered viewpoint that prioritizes the concept of “media capture” over traditional professionalization metrics, noting that in Kazakhstan, self-censorship, selective law enforcement, and ownership concentration serve as more reliable indicators of state dominance than formal media freedom indices.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlighted that no single model can completely capture the complexity of post-Soviet media landscapes, urging scholars to adapt the original framework to account for hybridity, authoritarian legacies, and the interplay between formal institutions and informal practices. In later reflections, Hallin (2012) further emphasized the need to move beyond the Western-centric typology and incorporate “peripheral” systems, such as those in post-communist and Central Asian states, where state control coexists with market pressures and digital disruption.

Beimenbetov (2023) complements this view by focusing on the digital transformation of the Kazakhstani media landscape. He demonstrates that while the country has seen rapid growth in online media and social platforms, the state has effectively extended its control through a combination of technical regulation, such as internet filtering and mandatory registration of news sites, and economic leverage via state advertising and subsidies. Beimenbetov thus calls for a methodology that integrates traditional media system analysis with digital authoritarianism studies—a perspective that has been largely absent from earlier comparative work on the region.

Mirzoyeva et al. (2024) add another layer by examining the role of language policy and national identity in shaping media pluralism. They argue that the promotion of Kazakh-language content, while ostensibly aimed at cultural decolonization, has also been instrumentalized to limit access to indepen-

dent Russian-language media and strengthen state-aligned narratives. This observation underscores the need for intersectional approaches that combine media system theory with postcolonial and language-policy frameworks.

Finally, Nurash and Rozhkov (2024) provide a critical reflection on the methodological challenges of researching Kazakhstan's media under conditions of restricted academic freedom. They highlight the difficulty of obtaining reliable data on ownership structures and editorial independence, and advocate for mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative interviews with exiled journalists, content analysis of state-aligned outlets, and the use of digital forensics tools to trace propaganda networks.

Taken together, these recent studies do not use the original Hallin-Mancini typology. Instead, scholars are increasingly advocating hybrid, context-sensitive methodologies that integrate concepts of media capture, digital authoritarianism, language politics, and the constraints of autocratic research environments. The present article builds on these methodological reflections to analyze the latest trends in Kazakhstan's media system, including the impact of the 2022 constitutional reforms, the rise of Telegram as a primary information channel, and the continued tightening of legal and economic controls following the January 2022 events.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study method, taking Kazakhstan as a single in-depth case, to examine and refine the comparative media system framework of Hallin and Mancini under the background of the post-Soviet mixed regime (2004,2012). It can be analyzed from four dimensions: the development of the media market, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism and the role of the state. This research method does not apply the model as a strict typology, but rather as a heuristic tool to guide structured empirical tests. The aim of this study is not to generate new statistical data, but to improve the existing theories through a restructured interpretation of the existing empirical evidence.

This study takes the four analytical dimensions of Hallin and Mancini as the theoretical framework, but does not regard them as strict type categories, but rather as heuristic tools. Each dimension is operated through specific empirical indicators: first, the media market structure is evaluated through ownership concentration, national advertising mecha-

nisms, and digital market expansion. Then, political parallelism is examined through models such as state proximity, regulatory intervention, and the closure of independent outlets. Thirdly, assess the professionalism of journalism through evidence from journalism education, self-regulatory practices and self-censorship. Finally, the role of the state is analyzed through legal reform, economic levers and digital governance strategies. By applying this theoretical framework, a systematic connection between theoretical and empirical analysis is ensured.

To guide this analysis, the article is structured around the following core research questions:

QR1: How do the four analytical dimensions of the Hallin and Mancini framework—media market development, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and state intervention—manifest in Kazakhstan's media system?

QR2: In what ways does the Kazakhstani case confirm, challenge, or necessitate a refinement of the Hallin and Mancini typology? What are the defining features of a proposed media system model, and how does it differ from the Polarized Pluralist, Democratic Corporatist, and Liberal models?

QR3: How have digitalization and the rise of social media platforms reconfigured the relationships between the state, legacy media, journalists, and the public? Specifically, how has the state adapted its mechanisms of influence to maintain systemic stability in the digital sphere?

QR4: How do media practitioners in Kazakhstan navigate the conflicting demands of state influence, commercial pressure, and emerging professional norms? What strategies of adaptation, self-censorship, and resistance define contemporary journalistic practice within this hybrid system?

These research questions cause hypothetical suggestions. First, the development of the media market is characterized by commercial expansion and digital diversification, but the structure of the media market still relies on the support of relevant state funds and the elite economy. Political parallelism is mainly manifested as being oriented towards the state rather than based on political parties. Journalism professionalism has shown some modernization through the development of digital skills and educational programs, but it still has institutional deficiencies and is constrained by unstable economic and political pressures. State intervention continues to play a leading role; the state indirectly controls the development of the media system through supervision, economic levers, and digital governance mechanisms.

Second, the media system of Kazakhstan challenges the interpretative scope of existing models. It is a state-oriented rather than party-based political parallel, and its informal and neo-patrimonial state media control mechanisms and other features indicate that the Hallin and Mancini models need to be improved. The definition of the “authorized pluralist media model” media system model is a media governance model constructed by the state through a combination of formal supervision, informal sponsorship relationships, and economic levers. Unlike the polarized pluralism model, the political parallelism in this structure is mainly state-oriented rather than party-oriented. Unlike the democratic corporatist model, the institutionalization degree of its journalistic professionalism and media autonomy is relatively weak. Unlike the liberal model, its market mechanism operates under continuous political and elite constraints.

Third, the development of digital platforms has diversified the ways of information production and the channels for audience participation, and has also personalized news work. However, it has simultaneously weakened traditional media. This enables the country to maintain its influence over the media system through indirect and networked forms. The government of Kazakhstan has shifted from direct control over traditional media to indirect, networked and adaptive governance forms, including regulatory expansion, economic leverage, platform mediation and selective tolerance for digital expression, thereby maintaining system stability.

Lastly, in Kazakhstan’s mixed media system, media practitioners mainly embrace new technologies, enhance their personal skills and market orientation capabilities through news education and early vocational training. Therefore, adaptation and self-examination have become regular professional practices, while resistance is mainly expressed in indirect, individualized, and non-confrontational forms.

The analysis is carried out in four stages:

(1) Analysis and application of the theoretical framework of Hallin and Mancini.

(2) Analysis of the institutional and legal framework for media regulation and ownership structure in Kazakhstan.

(3) Analysis of the Structure and professional practices of digital transformation in Kazakhstan.

(4) Finally, conduct a comprehensive comparison and combine the analysis results with the four analytical dimensions to identify the pattern of Kazakhstan’s media system – “authorized pluralist media model”.

This study is subject to several limitations stemming from its exclusive reliance on secondary data. First, the analysis depends on the availability, quality, and scope of existing academic literature, policy documents, industry reports, and publicly accessible statistics, which may be outdated, incomplete, or shaped by the institutional or political contexts in which they were produced. Second, the absence of primary empirical data – such as interviews with media practitioners, audience surveys, or ethnographic observations – limits the ability to capture real-time dynamics, informal practices, and nuanced professional perspectives within Kazakhstan’s media system. Finally, restrictions on data transparency and press freedom in the national context may result in gaps or inconsistencies in available sources, which can affect the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the study’s conclusions.

## Results and discussion

This section offers a comprehensive empirical study of the Kazakhstan media system, which is based on the four dimensions introduced by Hallin and Mancini (2004, 2012), as described in the methodology section.

The first dimension concerns the structure of the media market. The Kazakhstani media environment is characterized by quantitative development alongside qualitative limitations. According to the Ministry of Information and Social Development, as of 2019, Kazakhstan had 2,790 registered newspapers and publications, 340 information agencies and websites, 128 television channels, and 70 radio stations (Medvednikova, 2019). Despite this, the media ownership structure remains highly centralized.

Recent data indicate a substantially expanded media landscape in Kazakhstan. As of early 2026, the number of internet users is estimated at 19.50 million, constituting 93.4% of the total population of 20.99 million (Kemp, 2025). Social media penetration has also seen significant growth, reaching 16.90 million users, or 80.8% of the population (Kemp, 2025).

A survey conducted by the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies (KazISS) between March and April 2025, involving 8,001 participants, revealed that 59.1% of respondents rely on national TV channels as their primary information source. This is followed by social networks and messengers (34.7%) and online media (30.3%), while only 9.2% of the population continues to utilize printed newspapers and magazines (Zabirova, 2025).

The newspaper industry has low market penetration and linguistic-political stratification. The government-owned newspapers are Egemen Qazaqstan, which is in Kazakh with a circulation of 201,750 copies, and Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, which is in Russian and has a circulation of 100,000 copies. On the other hand, private newspapers such as Karavan reach a combined circulation of 500,000 copies but do not address sensitive political issues (Medvednikova, 2019). This model reveals a possibility: commercial success can be achieved within political boundaries, which is opposite to the Western assumption that market forces drive editorial independence.

Broadcasting is still under the control of large state-owned conglomerates, thereby ensuring that government dissemination of messages is prioritized through reach rather than pluralism. The dynamic online environment is also heavily regulated; since 2009, all online sources are considered members of the media, which are obliged to be licensed by the state (Mysayeva, 2016). The television segment is characterized by government regulation, which exists in conjunction with a mask of diversity. Even though there are a number of television channels, a significant amount is actually state-owned, has close ties to the state, or is state-controlled. The state-owned television channels are the most dominant, with the state television station being the main source of news for a significant amount of the population (Zhanabekova et al., 2014).

Digital transformation is the most prominent structural change in modern society. In 2014, 68.1% of the population from 16 to 74 years old used the internet. By early 2026, this figure is expected to increase to 93.4%, with the number of internet users reaching 19.5 million and mobile users reaching 27.3 million, thanks to further investment in digital infrastructure. (Kemp, 2025). Online content shows Russian language dominance at 94.1%, followed by Kazakh at 4.5% and English at 1.4% (Mysayeva, 2016). The republic has the highest usage of social networks in Central Asia; specifically, the usage rate for Facebook is 72%, and for Instagram, it is 82.7% (Gainous et al., 2025). By the beginning of 2026, Facebook is expected to have 4.70 million users in Kazakhstan, making up 22.5% of the population. More platforms are emerging as popular choices. The social media landscape is becoming increasingly diverse (Kemp, 2025). Additionally, the state has identified websites as media institutions, subject to government regulations introduced in 2009 (Mysayeva, 2016). Such a regulatory policy mixes the

line dividing traditional from modern media, applying the structure of media control from the Soviet past to the modern era of digital media.

The second dimension deals with the problem of political parallelism. In Kazakhstan, the media are arrayed along a spectrum of closeness to state power rather than along party lines. The Media Sustainability Index in 2019 reported on the systemic challenges that included the shutdown of prominent independent online news resources such as Ratel.kz and periodic shutdowns of the Internet during high-stakes political broadcasting (Medvednikova, 2019). Changes introduced in the media law of 2018 required user identification on online comments, which led prominent news portals: zakon.kz, sputniknews.kz, informburo.kz, etc., to turn off comment functionality (Medvednikova, 2019). Most Recent Issue “Mass Media Law” of the Republic of Kazakhstan came into effect in August 2024, maintaining this trend (Freedom House, 2024). Although the law introduced some improvements, including shortening the litigation period for media institutions from two years to one year, reducing the response time for official media inquiries from seven days to five days, providing funding for non-governmental media, and granting journalists special legal status, these concessions were accompanied by some provisions that drew strong criticism from media rights organizations (Freedom House, 2024). The independent monitoring agency “Voice of Justice” criticized the ambiguous statement in the law regarding “supervision of media that engages in behavior contrary to universal, cultural, ethnic and family values”, failing to strengthen protection of journalists from obstruction, and demanding that media workers abide by the internal regulations issued by state institutions (Freedom House, 2024). The law also retained ambiguous provisions on the certification of foreign journalists, allowing them to be barred based on “propaganda and extremism” (Freedom House, 2024).

Studies on the political effects of social media use have revealed significant effects on attitudinal change. In a survey of 6,800 Kazakhstani nationals, Gainous et al. (2025) investigated the relationship between Facebook use and political attitudes. The findings revealed that trust in government was significantly negatively related to exposure to dissident messages on Facebook, while there was a significantly positive relationship with protest intention. The relationship was moderated by individuals’ trust in the Facebook platform, which affects the

impact of dissident messages on political attitudes in an authoritarian regime.

The platforms of choice changed drastically in the 2010s. Earlier, Russian social media platforms (Moy Mir, Odnoklassniki, VKontakte) led the way. The shift from Russian platforms might be attributed to a variety of reasons, such as language choice, a lack of desired services, as well as security issues that arose when Russian platforms demanded genuine mobile numbers for registration, unlike Western platforms that allowed registration via emails (Gainous et al., 2025).

Dimension three is about journalistic professionalism. Education for journalism expanded significantly with 43 bachelor's degree programs and over 5,000 students enrolled. A significant gap persists between the educational content and the demands of the industry, which prioritize practical application and experience (Alzhanova et al., 2025). The degree courses are geared toward video reporting, editing, use of technologies, and critical thinking skills such as error identification and distinguishing fact from opinion, yet there is a notable absence of effective experience and opportunities for practical application. Studies surveyed scholars, as well as media experts, and concluded a common agreement that theoretical teaching is necessary alongside hands-on training, with a focus on manipulation, concept analysis, and a critical approach in the future and fostering stronger industry-university collaboration to bridge the gap between talent cultivation and market demands (Alzhanova et al., 2025).

Despite all this, professional freedom is still constrained. In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, journalists had to strike a balance between ensuring the quality of information within state-managed communicative environments (Sultanbaeva et al., 2022). The literature points out the “absence of clearly defined research on a new standard for a new type of media”, as well as the lack of overall understanding within the Kazakhstani media environment with respect to “norms, shapes, and practices of self-regulation” (Mysayeva, 2016). The situation is also getting worse. Increasingly young people are leaving state-controlled traditional media for digital platforms like Instagram and TikTok. This makes traditional broadcasters less effective, even though they get huge subsidies. Meanwhile, the number of user-generated content is growing faster than professional reporting. These trends are breaking up the media market and changing what it means to be credible from institutional authority to release speed and immersive sense (Kassymbekova et al., 2025).

Overall, professional associations are still underdeveloped, with insufficiently strong organizational structures providing common support for the protection of professional freedom. Platform-specific behavior indicates the existence of adaptation, with the encrypted, subscription-based system of Telegram providing a relatively high level of protection for more critical content compared to publicly available websites and is thus more popular among people (Mussa & Mysayeva, 2024).

Dimension four studies probably the most important question: the role of the state. The state intervention is implemented through a sophisticated legal-regulatory framework in Kazakhstan. To legitimize its oversight, the government uses the fragmented identity that globalization has caused to make digital control look like a necessary way to protect national traditions from Western cultural influence (Syzdykova et al., 2024). This ideological stance is underpinned by a rigorous legal-regulatory framework. Fundamentally, the legal environment considers all websites to be publishing media, which laid the groundwork for state oversight. These modifications essentially put the blame back on the original source, creating a “controlled diversity” setting where more personal accountability goes hand in hand with less liberalization (Mysayeva, 2016). This control was tightened by changes that came into effect in 2018, which introduced the compulsory identification of users posting comments (Medvednikova, 2019). Consequently, these amendments transferred responsibility to the initial source and expanded the list of persons exempt from responsibility, creating a legal environment that simultaneously tightens control while offering limited liberalization to maintain controlled diversity (Medvednikova, 2019). Moreover, digital technological capacity is also deployed for suppression; measures aimed at societal control include selective internet shutdowns during highly politicized events, such as broadcasts by opposition figures (Medvednikova, 2019).

The “Mass Media Law”, which was released on June, 2024 and came into effect on August, 2024, is an important reform since it is closely related to the scope of state intervention. This law confirms the current regulatory framework fundamentally, clearly stating that all online media institutions should be regarded as mass media, which should be registered and in charge by authority. In this law, the registration of online media institutions and information institutions is optional. Although the law contains some innovations, for example, allocating state financial assistance to non-governmental mass media

and designating an official special status for journalists. Furthermore, the legislation on mass media has numerous ambiguities in terms of controlling media content, covering various aspects such as general, cultural, national and family values, which provides a great deal of freedom for the relevant institutions. Moreover, the rules for foreign media certification that can be implemented in cases of propaganda or extremism are a way to strengthen the state's control over information (Freedom House, 2024). Therefore, the new law reinforces the “controlled diversification” model and confirms the overall national control characteristics of the “authorized” multimedia system in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan uses sophisticated methods, such as the enhancement of government-sponsored content to maintain regime stability. The state has evolved from simple suppression to complex informational manipulation, though this remains dissatisfied by citizens (Vesterbye et al., 2023). Nevertheless, social hot events point to the limits of this state control. For instance, the 2018 protests following the murder of Denis Ten and the Kok-Zhailau nature protection campaign occurred largely on social media (Medvednikova, 2019). These events reflected a “mood of protest”, indicating the existence of citizens demanding changes within the law enforcement system, despite the state's efforts to dominate the digital narrative (Medvednikova, 2019).

## Conclusion

The empirical evidence reveals four patterns. Firstly, commercial media sectors exist but are subject to state economic power via advertising management, creating patron rather than competitive dynamics. Secondly, media outlets align along a state-proximity spectrum with systematic closure of independent outlets and digital surveillance infrastructure, along with a digital surveillance system, rather than reflecting societal cleavages. Thirdly, journalism education has been greatly increased, but professional freedom remains weak, with journalists responding to conditions via self-censorship and media platform diversification. Fourthly, state intervention is multiple, involving legal-regulatory frameworks, economic power, technological control, and a certain acceptance of pluralism.

These findings expose the effectiveness and limitations of applying Western theoretical frameworks to non-Western contexts. Although Hallin and Mancini's theoretical system provides an analytical structure and promotes systematic comparison, it requires

significant adaptation to the context of Kazakhstan's hybrid political system. The case of Kazakhstan reveals the macroscopic laws of the evolution of the media system under a hybrid political system in the digital age, providing an academic reference for the academic community to understand how non-democratic countries maintain political control while adapting to technological changes through a sophisticated mechanism that integrates commercial markets, professional education, digital diversification, state-oriented parallelism, weak institutional autonomy, and comprehensive intervention.

This article argues that Kazakhstan represents a distinct, “authorized pluralist media model”, characterized by a dominant, neo-patrimonial state that exercises influence through a combination of legal-regulatory coercion, opaque economic leverage (especially via state-connected holdings and advertising), and tolerated but managed pluralism within clearly defined ideological boundaries. The system exhibits high levels of state-oriented political parallelism rather than party-political parallelism, weak institutionalization of journalistic autonomy, and a commercial market that is active yet subordinated to political and elite economic interests. The advent of digital media and social networks has not dismantled this system but has instead introduced new arenas of contestation, adaptation, and control, leading to a dynamic and often contradictory media ecology.

The term “authorized pluralist media model” is a specific conceptual innovative term in the article, designed to capture the unique hybrid nature of Kazakhstan's media system. It deliberately uses “authorized” to emphasize that pluralism which stands for diversity of opinions and media outlets is not fully organic or independent, but rather permitted, sanctioned, and controlled by the state. This distinguishes it from genuine liberal pluralism seen in Western democracies.

The term “authorized” is employed in this study in preference to “authoritarian” to more accurately capture the nature of pluralism within Kazakhstan's media system. Specifically, authorized pluralism denotes a form of state-regulated diversity in which limited liberalization is deliberately permitted by governmental authorities. Such pluralism is most evident in digital and social media environments, where a wider range of informational content and public discourse can be observed. However, this diversity operates within clearly defined boundaries that ensure the preservation of overarching political control. By contrast, traditional media sectors – television, radio, and print – remain subject to strict

institutional regulation, with ownership structures predominantly aligned with the state or pro-government actors.

This configuration differs fundamentally from pluralism in fully liberal media systems, such as those described in Hallin and Mancini's Liberal Model, where media diversity emerges primarily through market mechanisms and independent journalistic practices with minimal state intervention. We argue that D. Hallin and P. Mancini's methodology has limited applicability to the case of Kazakhstan due to the one of the key aspects of so-called "political parallelism", given the general weakness of civil society institutions in general and political parties in particular. In Kazakhstan, pluralism is not an autonomous outcome but rather a sanctioned condition, the scope of which is determined by the state. Such controlled openness is often justified by objectives related to economic development, technological modernization, or international legitimacy, while simultaneously limiting the potential for political

contestation. Accordingly, the label "authoritarian pluralist model" would be analytically imprecise, as it implies an entirely repressive environment devoid of meaningful pluralism. The concept of authorized pluralism more effectively reflects a system characterized by managed or calibrated diversity, in which the state functions as a central gatekeeper – endorsing specific forms of media openness while maintaining firm control over political boundaries and dissent. The article synthesizes these views to argue that Kazakhstan's media system is "state-oriented" rather than party-oriented. It functions as an "Authorized Pluralist" model – where diversity is not organic but is permitted, sanctioned, and controlled by the state to maintain systemic stability while allowing for technological modernization.

### Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge that this research was conducted without external funding.

### Author Contributions

Ilya Bykov: Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing, Review & Editing.

Xuanru Li: Methodology, Writing, Review & Editing.

Xinyu Xie: Investigation, Writing, Review & Editing.

Arailym Zhakypova: Formal Analysis, Writing, Review & Editing.

### References

- Alzhanova, A., Auesbay, K., Abdrassilov, A., Aizhanova, R., & Alkozhaeva, A. (2025). Kazakh journalism education in the context of modern realities. *Herald of Journalism*, 75(1), 32–39. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ202575103>
- Alzhanova, A. & Yerkimbay, A., (2013). Radio in Kazakhstan since Independence. *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Bulletin. Journalism Series*, 3(34), 176-180.
- Barlybaeva, S. H., & Ayapbergenova, A. (2025). Digital Kazakhstan – an innovation way of development. *Bulletin. Journalism Series*, 2(76), 147–154. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ202576211>
- Beimenbetov, S. (2023). Mapping Internet and social media use in Central Asia. *International Relations and International Law Journal*, 103(3), 60–68. <https://doi.org/10.26577/IRILJ.2023.v103.i3.06>
- Beisembayeva, D., Papoutsaki, E., Kolesova E., (2013). Social media and online activism in Kazakhstan: a new challenge for authoritarianism? *The Asian Conference of Media and Mass Communication*, Osaka, Japan. Unitec Institute of Technology, New Zealand. 1-19.
- Gainous, J., Wagner, K., Bekmagambetov, A., Rodionov, A., Beimenbetov, S., Zhanadilova, A., & Karimova, Z. (2025). The role of trust in social media platforms in shaping political effects of dissident information flows: A case of Facebook in Kazakhstan. *International Journal of Communication*, 19, 716–739. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/22723/4914>
- Hallin, D. C., Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hallin, D. C., Mancini, P. (2012). *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ibrayeva, G., Myssayeva, K., Alzhanova A., Development of Radio in Kazakhstan. *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 19(2). DOI: 10.1080/19376529.2012.722488
- Kassymbekova, N., Tolegen, E., Buyenbayeva, Z., Almanova, N., & Shyngyssova, N. (2025). The impact of the technological boom on traditional and social media in Kazakhstan. *Studies in Media and Communication*, 13(2), 123–133. <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v13i2.7536>
- Freedom House. (2024). *Kazakhstan: Freedom on the Net 2024*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2024>
- Kemp, S. (2025). *Digital 2026: Kazakhstan. DataReportal – Global Digital Insights*. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kazakhstan/freedom-net/2024>
- Medvednikova, D., (2019). *Media Sustainability Index. Tracking Development of Sustainable Independent Media Around the World*. IREX, 1-16.

- Mirzoyeva, L., Sultanbaeva, E., & Yunxiao, M. (2024). CCTV-1 media trends: diversity, interactivity, and personalization. *Herald of Journalism*, 73(3), 65–72. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2024.v73.i3.6>
- Mussa, N., & Myssayeva, K. (2024). How are conflicts covered in social media? The case study of Kazakhstan's Telegram channels "Orda" and "Kazinform". *Herald of Journalism*, 73(3), 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2024.v73.i3.5>
- Mysayeva, K. N., (2016). Kazakhstan's New Media Development: Role of Social Media on Society. *Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. Bulletin. Journalism Series*, 2(40), 1–6.
- Nurash, A., & Rozhkov, A. (2024). Thematic programs (television) and periodicals about the culture of the period of Kazakhstan's independence. *Herald of Journalism*, 73(3), 132–141. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2024.v73.i3.11>
- Petrov, B. (2022). Development of a database of Kazakh digital multicultural content as a means of training future journalists: Astana IT University, Kazakhstan, Astana city. *Herald of Journalism*, 65(3), 12–21. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2022.v65.i3.02>
- Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. University of Illinois Press
- Sultanbayeva, G. S., Gorbunova, A. A., & Lozhnikova, O. P. (2022). Research, analysis and assessment of public demand for reliable information during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Herald of Journalism*, 63(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2022.v63.i1.01>
- Shyngyssova, N., & Skripnikova, A. (2021). Trends of tabloid journalism in Kazakhstan. *Herald of Journalism*, 59(1), 13–20. <https://doi.org/10.26577/HJ.2021.v59.i1.02>
- Syzdykova, M., Abikenov, Z., Abdiramanova, A., & Ilyassova, E. (2024). Influence of globalization on the transformation of Kazakh traditions and culture: A case study of Southern Kazakhstan. *Changing Societies & Personalities*, 8(4), 964–984. <https://doi.org/10.15826/csp.2024.8.4.308>
- Vesterbye, S.D., Dzhuraev, S., & Marazis, A. (2023). *Central Asian media consumption and disinformation: A quantitative and qualitative assessment in the context of geopolitics*. European Neighbourhood Council. <https://encouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2023-03-ENC-Report-ENG-V8.pdf>
- Zabirova, A. (2025). *Media archipelago of Kazakhstan*. Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS). <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-kazakhstan>
- Zhanabekova, M., Barlybayeva, S., & Myssayeva, K. (2014). Development of mass media in Kazakhstan. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 159, 512–516. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.415>

**Information about authors:**

- Ilya Bykov (corresponding author) – Doctor of Political Science, Professor of the Higher School of Journalism and Mass Communication at St Petersburg State University (St Petersburg, Russia, e-mail: [i.bykov@spbu.ru](mailto:i.bykov@spbu.ru)).
- Xuanru Li – PhD-Student of the Department of Media and Communication at the Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University (Suzhou, China, e-mail: [sarahxyru@gmail.com](mailto:sarahxyru@gmail.com)).
- Xinyu Xie – Lecturer of Media and Design College at Longyan University (Longyan, Fujian, China, e-mail: [Xiexinyulance@gmail.com](mailto:Xiexinyulance@gmail.com)).
- Arailym Zhakypova – Middle East Media Educator Journal, University of Wollongong (Dubai, United Arab Emirates, e-mail: [a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com](mailto:a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com)).

**Авторлар туралы мәлімет:**

- Илья Быков (корреспонденттік автор) – саяси ғылымдар докторы, Санкт-Петербург мемлекеттік университетінің Журналистика және бұқаралық коммуникация жоғары мектебінің профессоры (Санкт-Петербург, Ресей, e-mail: [i.bykov@spbu.ru](mailto:i.bykov@spbu.ru)).
- Сюаньжу Ли – Сиань Цзяотун-Ливерпуль университетінің Медиа және коммуникация департаментінің PhD докторанты (Сучжоу, Қытай, e-mail: [sarahxyru@gmail.com](mailto:sarahxyru@gmail.com)).
- Синьюй Се – Лунъянь университетінің Медиа және дизайн колледжінің оқытушысы (Лунъянь, Фуцзянь, Қытай, e-mail: [Xiexinyulance@gmail.com](mailto:Xiexinyulance@gmail.com)).
- Арайлым Жақыпова – Middle East Media Educator журналы, Вуллонгонг университеті (Дубай, Біріккен Араб Әмірліктері, e-mail: [a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com](mailto:a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com)).

**Сведения об авторах:**

- Илья Быков (автор для корреспонденции) – доктор политических наук, профессор Высшей школы журналистики и массовых коммуникаций Санкт-Петербургского государственного университета (Санкт-Петербург, Россия, e-mail: [i.bykov@spbu.ru](mailto:i.bykov@spbu.ru));
- Сюаньжу Ли – PhD-докторант департамента медиа и коммуникаций Сиань Цзяотун-Ливерпульского университета (Сучжоу, Китай, e-mail: [sarahxyru@gmail.com](mailto:sarahxyru@gmail.com));
- Синьюй Се – преподаватель Колледжа медиа и дизайна Лунъяньского университета (Лунъянь, Фуцзянь, Китай, e-mail: [Xiexinyulance@gmail.com](mailto:Xiexinyulance@gmail.com));
- Арайлым Жакыпова – журнал Middle East Media Educator, Университет Вуллонгонг (Дубай, Объединенные Арабские Эмираты, e-mail: [a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com](mailto:a.t.zhakypova@gmail.com)).

Received: November 18, 2025

Accepted: February 27, 2026