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Re-legitimation after the Destabilization of Shared-Power Structures in Authoritarian Regimes: the case of Kazakhstan and Russia

MA thesis

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Tartu 2026

Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

Word count of the thesis:21215

Ren Yashiro, 18.05.2026

Abstract: How do authoritarian leaders re-legitimate presidential authority after moments of protest and unrest? This thesis examines this question through a comparative analysis of Russia after the 2011-2012 protests and Kazakhstan after the January 2022 events. Both cases are post-Soviet authoritarian regimes in which political authority had been divided between a predecessor and a successor, and both faced the need to reconstruct presidential authority after political contestation. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this study analyzes presidential speeches, official addresses, and campaign articles. It argues that both cases transformed unrest into reasons for renewed presidential centrality, but through different strategies. In Russia, Putin's return was re-legitimated through continuity, sovereignty, state strength, and the protection of the post-2000 order. In Kazakhstan, Tokayev's authority was re-legitimated through corrective renewal, selective rupture from the Nazarbayev-era order, reform and justice. Ultimately, this thesis argues that the re-legitimation in authoritarian regimes should be understood not only as an institutional or coercive process, but also as a discursive process through which leaders interpret protests and the past, and make renewed presidential centrality appear necessary.

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1 Introduction

More than three decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, several post-Soviet states have demonstrated authoritarian resilience while maintaining formal democratic institutions such as elections, multi-party systems, and constitutional rule. Despite the widespread belief that the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) and democratization transition theories that prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, contemporary non-democratic regimes have not only defied collapse but have also thrived. By navigating the processes of globalization and digitalization, these regimes have refined their unique logics of dominance. According to Our World in Data (2024), which reports the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index on a 0-10 scale, Russia scored 2.03 in 2024, reflecting a gradual decline since 2006, while Kazakhstan scored 3.08 during the same period (Our World in Data, 2024). These figures underline the fact that stable authoritarian structures have been firmly deep-rooted in both nations for nearly two decades. Earlier studies explained this resilience mainly through institutional and structural factors, showing how authoritarian regimes use repression, co-optation, and nominally democratic institutions to manage elites and society (Gerschewski, 2013; Levitsky & Way, 2010). However, these approaches say less about how regimes justify their rule in language, especially when the regime authority becomes unstable.

This study starts from the argument that authoritarian rule depends not only on suppression or institutional design, but also on legitimation. Regimes must continuously present their rule as appropriate, necessary, and socially acceptable (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). This process becomes especially important when a political order is destabilized and enters a "legitimation crisis" (Habermas, 1976). The central problem of this thesis is therefore not legitimacy in stable times, but re-legitimation: how political leaders interpret disorder, frame the past, and justify a new authority through presidential discourse.

This question is particularly important in shared-power structures, where authority is divided between a predecessor and a successor. In such settings, the predecessor's legacy may remain politically powerful even after formal transfer of office, while the successor must still build an independent basis of authority (Bünte, 2022; Hale & Colton, 2010; Viktorov, 2014). Under stable conditions, this tension can remain politically manageable (Hale & Colton, 2010; Caron, 2023). Under conditions of protest, violence, or elite fragmentation, however, it

becomes much harder to sustain a coherent narrative of rule (Viktorov, 2014; Abishev et al., 2024). For this reason, shared-power structures are useful settings for examining how leaders discursively repair presidential authority during moments of political strain.

To explore this problem, this thesis compares Russia after the 2011–2012 protests and Kazakhstan after the January 2022 events. These two cases share important background conditions: both are post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, both were shaped by long-serving dominant leaders, and both developed forms of shared-power between a predecessor and a successor (Hale & Colton, 2010; Abishev et al., 2024; Higashijima & Shiraito, 2025). In Russia, the 2011–2012 demonstrations were widely reported at the time as the largest opposition protests of the Putin era, and some media reports at that time described the December 2011 rallies as the largest protest against Putin's rule or as the biggest demonstration since the fall of the Soviet Union (Reuters, 2011; Elder, 2011). After these protests, Putin's return was framed through Putinist narrative of stability, unity, strong statehood , and sovereignty, and the post-protest regime attempted to reset the political system by promising greater openness, competitiveness, and legitimacy while maintaining vertical control (Bacon, 2012; Pertsev, 2016). In Kazakhstan, the January 2022 events[1] were described by multiple media as the worst unrest since independence, while regional reporting also quickly framed them as part of a broader struggle within the ruling elite (Associated Press, 2022; ABC News, 2022). After January 2022, Kazakhstan entered a process of "de-Nazarbayevification." Nazarbayev lost his special status and privileges, the capital was renamed from Nur-Sultan back to Astana, and the several figures close to the former President were marginalized (Caron, 2023).

These cases raise a broader question about how authoritarian leaders rebuild presidential authority when shared-power arrangements become unstable. This thesis addresses that question by examining how presidential discourse defines protest and unrest, interprets the legacy of the previous regime, and justifies a new political order. The research questions are as follows:

"*How is presidential authority discursively re-legitimated after the destabilization of shared-power structures in authoritarian regimes?*"

[1] These events are known as the "Bloody January" (*Qandy Qantar).*

"*How do these discourses reinterpret the legacy of the previous regime to articulate a new political order?*"

The objective of this comparative analysis is to examine the shift in legitimation strategies in Russia and Kazakhstan. By analyzing the political narratives of the new leaderships, this study reveals how internal dissent was contextualized or marginalized to consolidate a new, centralized form of presidential authority following the end of shared-power structures.

This thesis starts from the central theoretical expectation that when shared-power structures become destabilized, presidential discourse will reinterpret protest or unrest as evidence that renewed presidential centrality is necessary. Since Putin and Tokayev stood in different relationships to the inherited order, this re-legitimation is expected to take different forms: protective continuity in Russia and corrective renewal in Kazakhstan. The thesis proceeds as follows. Next chapter develops the theoretical framework by defining legitimacy, legitimation, re-legitimation, shared-power structures, and presidential authority. Third chapter explains the research design, data collection, coding strategy, and limitations. Fourth chapter presents the empirical analysis of Russia and Kazakhstan. Fifth chapter compares the two cases and discusses the main findings. Last chapter concludes by answering the research questions and reflecting on the broader implications of the study.

This study makes three main academic contributions. First, it shifts attention from authoritarian durability in general to the discursive repair of presidential authority after moments of protest, unrest, and elite instability. Second, it develops a qualitative discourse analysis to examine re-legitimation through four analytical codes: problem framing, legacy framing, leadership claim, and political order configuration. These codes guide the close reading of how presidential discourse constructs political problems, interprets the past, claims presidential agency, and presents a particular political order as necessary. Van Leeuwen's categories of authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis are used to clarify how these meanings are justified as legitimate in discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Third, by comparing Russia after the 2011-12 protests and Kazakhstan after the January 2022 events, this study shows how two post-Soviet authoritarian regimes produced different discursive solutions to a similar problem. By comparing Russia and Kazakhstan, this thesis shows that

similar moments of shared-power destabilization can produce different forms of discursive repair. Russia reconstructed presidential authority through continuity, sovereignty, and state strength, while Kazakhstan did so through corrective renewal, reform, justice, and selective distancing form the Nazarbayev-era order. The broader argument is that authoritarian resilience depends not only on institutions, repression, or elite management, but also on the ability to reinterpret crisis and make renewed presidential authority appear necessary.

2 Theoretical Framework

This section establishes the theoretical foundations of the thesis. The central concern of this study is how presidential authority is discursively re-legitimated when shared-power structures become unstable. To address this question, the chapter first clarifies the key concepts used in the analysis; legitimacy, legitimation, re-legitimation, shared-power structures, and presidential authority. This framework integrates classical sociological perspectives with modern theories of authoritarian resilience and discourse analysis.

The chapter is organized into two main parts. The first part defines the core concepts of the study. It begins with legitimacy and legitimation, then explains why shared-power structures create specific vulnerabilities in authoritarian regimes. It also clarifies how presidential authority is understood in this thesis. The second part reviews the existing literature on authoritarian resilience discourse and legitimation, Russia's tandemocracy and the 2011-2012 protests, and Kazakhstan's tutelary regime and the January 2022 events. By combining these discussions together, the chapter provides the theoretical basis to explore how leaders interpret protest, unrest, and predecessor legacies in order to construct a new narrative of political order. .

2.1 Concepts

Legitimacy

In the fields of political science and sociology, any discussion regarding the concept of "legitimacy" must begin with the fundamental formulations of Max Weber. According to Weber's definition, for any form of domination (*herrschaft*) to persist in a long-term and stable

manner, it is not enough to rely solely on physical force, cold calculations of interest, or simple habitual obedience (Weber, 1978). For a system of rule to endure, it is essential that the governed possess a certain recognition that the rule is right—a state described as a "belief in its legitimacy" (Weber, 1978, p.213). In this context, legitimacy refers to the belief that a ruler's authority is rightful and acceptable. Easton conceptualized support for a political system in two layers: "Specific Support" and "Diffuse Support" (Easton, 1965; 1975). Specific Support refers to a practical type of support based on satisfaction with the concrete results (outputs) provided by the government, such as economic growth, social security, and the maintenance of public order (Easton, 1965). On the other hand, Diffuse Support refers to a more fundamental and emotional trust in the values and existence of the system itself, which remains even during times of temporary dissatisfaction or specific policy failures (Easton, 1965). This distinction is particularly useful because it allows legitimacy to be examined not only as an abstract belief, but also as a structured relationship between political performance, public evaluations, and deeper attachments to the regime. At the same time, support and legitimacy should not be treated as fully identical concepts. Support is broader than legitimacy because it may arise from practical or instrumental considerations, whereas legitimacy refers more specifically to the normative justification of political authority (Kriesi, 2013). Nevertheless, diffuse support comes closest to legitimacy belief because it captures a more durable form of trust and goodwill toward the political order (Easton, 1965; Kriesi, 2013). For this reason, this thesis uses Easton's framework not as a replacement for legitimacy, but as the main analytical bridge through which legitimacy can be examined empirically. However, in authoritarian regimes, apparent legitimacy may be fragile because rulers often rely on a combination of performance-based claims and other legitimating narratives, and performance-based claims become vulnerable when economic or social conditions decline (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015).

Accordingly, in the present study legitimacy is approached as a socially grounded belief that rule is appropriate, but one whose durability can be traced empirically through the relationship between specific support and diffuse support. This approach makes it possible to examine not only how regimes maintain authority in ordinary times, but also how latent weaknesses become visible when performance declines, expectations are frustrated, or a regime's justificatory claims come under strain.

In authoritarian settings, legitimacy may rest not only on performance, but also on perceptions of effectiveness and fairness, media trust, nationalism, and broader value orientations (Nathan, 2020). Performance-based legitimacy can be strong, but it is also fragile because it depends on continued delivery (DeBardeleben, 2013; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). For this reason, what appears stable may in fact rest on performance-based approval than on deep and durable attachment to the regime (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015).

In shared-power structures, which are the main focus of this study, legitimacy becomes more multi-layered because authority is divided between a predecessor and a successor. As DeBardeleben (2013) and Hale & Colton (2010) pointed out regarding the period of "tandemocracy" (*tandemokratiia*) in Russia, when Medvedev as the successor tried to gain new specific support through a liberal discourse of "modernization," the diffuse support of the public mostly remained with Putin, who was still seen as the true national leader. This duality helps explain why shared-power structures are especially vulnerable at moments of political strain, such as protests.

In authoritarian settings, this belief may depend not only on performance, but also on perceptions of effectiveness and fairness, as well as on symbolic attachments such as political myth, national identity, and leader-centered authority (Nathan, 2020). Legitimacy, therefore, is not identical to temporary popularity or policy success. It exists when a regime's claims to rule are accepted as appropriate within a shared normative and historical framework, and when this acceptance is durable enough to generate support beyond immediate policy satisfaction (Kriesi, 2013). In shared-power structures, this belief is especially fragile because legitimacy may be divided between competing political actors. The legitimation that this paper will examine in detail in the next section refers to the active and strategic practice of discourse performed to maintain this complex state of "legitimacy" or to reconstruct it during a time of crisis.

Legitimation

While the concept of "legitimacy," as discussed in the previous section, refers to a state or a condition in which a political order is accepted as appropriate, legitimation refers to the active process through which rulers seek to construct, maintain, and defend their right to rule. As Burnell (2006) points out, no autocratic regime can survive by depending only on

physical repression. Instead, these regimes must constantly present their rule as something right and appropriate to obtain the necessary approval from their citizens. This process is not a one-time event but a continuous effort to secure the belief in legitimacy that Max Weber described.

In a political context, this process is highly intentional. Political actors use "pre-planned" discourse to maintain their hegemony (Capone, 2010; Reyes, 2011). Political discourse is not just a collection of words. It refers to the public venues, speeches, and media events where leaders announce their agendas (Reyes, 2011). In these spaces, leaders act as "narrators" who present the current situation in a way that justifies their own actions (Reyes, 2008). This is an exercise of "soft power," as described by Chouliaraki (2005). Furthermore, political discourse requires speakers to present their claims as credible, authoritative, and truthful. In order to persuade their audience, political actors must provide justifications that appear reliable and convincing, thereby preventing skepticism among listeners (Chilton, 2004). In this sense, within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), legitimation as a form of discourse is often carried out in contexts of political urgency, where leaders seek to introduce change or reinforce their leadership (Buczowski & Strukowska, 2022). By strategically organizing their discourse, politicians can frame their specific self-interests as if they were the universal interests of the entire nation (Cap, 2008; Joseph, 2006). Therefore, in a political context, legitimation can be understood as reflecting the underlying social mechanisms that structure and sustain political power.

A central focus of this research is "re-legitimation." This specific process occurs when a regime's existing foundation of support is threatened by a crisis or when there is a transition from a shared-power structure to a new form of leadership. Reyes (2011) defines legitimation in political discourse as the process by which a speaker justifies a specific social action and presents it as acceptable. This is achieved by "*providing arguments that explain our social actions, ideas, thoughts, declarations, etc.*" (Reyes, 2011, p.782). When a regime faces a crisis, legitimation takes on the character of repair. It is no longer just about maintaining the status quo; it is about healing a damaged authority. According to Gerschewski (2013), regimes are supported by three pillars: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. When the pillar of legitimation begins to erode, the costs of repression increase, and the risk of regime collapse becomes much higher. When performance-based support becomes less persuasive, leaders

often use the diversionary theory to move the focus of legitimation to a different area (Abulof, 2013). Abulof (2013) describes this logic as the domestication of foreign policy, in which external conflicts or international crisis are used to reshape domestic political legitimacy by emphasizing external threats. This strategy helps the leader's survival by framing domestic opposition as a threat to national security. Kudaibergenova (2019) adds that nationalizing elites control these discourses to project a specific image of the nation. These elites use symbols and nationalistic projects to align the state's identity with their own political goals. When a crisis occurs, the state can manipulate these identity-based narratives to regain the public's trust.

Finally, the process of legitimation often involves the use of emotion, specifically fear. Discourse can construct binary oppositions, such as the "us versus them" concept, which contribute to forming a positive image of the in-group and a negative image of the out-group (Van Dijk, 2000). Reyes (2011) argues that political actors use hypothetical futures to justify their actions. This involves making prophecies that the worst will happen (such as a civil war or foreign invasion) if the people do not follow the regime's proposed path. By mobilizing fear, the regime distorts the public's ability to evaluate the situation logically. This "*naturalizes*" the government's choices, making it seem as if there is no other option (Reyes, 2011, p.794).

In summary, legitimation is defined as a dynamic and strategic process through which political actors use discourse to establish a belief in the legitimacy of their rule and present it as credible, authoritative, and acceptable. It is a highly strategic and goal-oriented form of communication. It involves not only defending political authority but also constructing a shared understanding of why that authority should be recognized as rightful. In periods of legitimacy crisis, this process becomes one of re-legitimation, as rulers attempt to restore damaged support and rebuild belief in their leadership.

Tandemocracy, Tutelary Regimes, and Shared-Power Structures

To understand the political systems of Russia and Kazakhstan analyzed in this thesis, it is first necessary to distinguish between tandemocracy, tutelary regime, and the broader category of shared-power structures. By applying the concept of "tutelary interference" as described by Bünte (2022), this paper attempts to clarify the essence of the shared-power structures within an authoritarian regime observed in Russia and Kazakhstan.

The term tandemocracy has mainly been used in the Russian context to describe the 2008-2012 regime between Medvedev and Putin. It refers to an unusual form of power-sharing within a hybrid regime. In this era, formal presidential authority and substantial political power did not fully coincide (Hale & Colton, 2010; Viktorov, 2014) It is therefore a historically specific and largely descriptive term rather than a general comparative concept. By contrast, tutelary regime is a broader comparative concept. Bünte (2022) describes this term as a political arrangement in which an elected leader operates under the constraint of a guardian who is not fully subject to electoral accountability, such as the military, a monarch, religious authorities, or a former ruler. This concept is especially useful for Kazakhstan between 2019-2022, where Nazarbayev retained major influence through his status as *Elbasy*[2] and Chairman of the Security Council even after Tokayev formally became President (Higashijima & Shiraito, 2025).

For the purpose of this thesis, the Russian-style "tandemocracy" and the Kazakhstan's "tutelary regime" are grouped under the broader term - a "shared-power structures." It refers to a political mechanism in which formal office and substantial authority are divided between a successor and a predecessor. In both Russia and Kazakhstan cases, the key problem was that authority was divided, responsibility became blurred, and the successor's claims to independent rule remained constrained by the continuing presence of the predecessor (Hale & Colton, 2010; Abishev et al., 2024) Under public contestation, it becomes more difficult to maintain a coherent narrative of rule, since the regime must decide whether to defend the inherited order, distance itself from it, or reinterpret it. For this reason, the destabilization of shared-power structures provides a useful setting for examining how presidential authority is discursively re-legitimated after strain and contestation.

Presidential Authority

Presidential Authority in authoritarian regimes does not refer only to the formal constitutional powers of the presidential office. It also refers to the President's capacity to claim, exercise, and justify central political direction over the state and society. At the formal level,

[2] Translated as "Leader of the Nation" from Kazakh

presidential authority includes constitutionally defined powers such as appointment and dismissal powers, legislative initiative, veto power, decree authority, referendum powers, emergency powers, and influence over executive decision-making. These formal powers matter because they provide institutional resources through which presidents can shape political and administrative outcomes (Metcalf, 2000). However, in authoritarian and post-Soviet presidential systems, formal powers alone do not fully explain how presidential authority operates. Power may be rooted not only in the office of the presidency, but also in informal patron-client networks, elite loyalty, security structures, and personalized relations of authority (Chaisty, 2019). Chaisty's analysis of post-Soviet presidentialism shows that presidential rule in this region often invests power in the ruler and personal networks of authority rather than in the presidency as a legal-rational institution (Chaisty, 2019). For this reason, presidential authority depends on formal constitutional powers, but also on the President's practical capacity to control or coordinate institutions, elites, and coercive resources. This distinction becomes especially important in shared-power setting. In tutelary regimes, elected or formally appointed leaders may hold office while another actor retains reserved domains, veto powers, or decisive influence over the political system (Bünte, 2022). In such cases, holding the presidency does not automatically mean possessing full presidential authority, because formal office and substantive control may become separated.

Presidential authority also has a personal and symbolic dimension. In authoritarian regimes where legal-rational institutions are weak or distrusted, the President's personal popularity, image, and reputation may compensate for low institutional legitimacy (Hutcheson & Petersson, 2016). This does not mean that popularity is the same as legitimacy. Rather, it suggests that in authoritarian regimes presidential authority is sustained partly through the leader's personal image and through political myths that present him as a source of order, stability, or protection.

In this thesis, presidential authority refers to the President's claimed capacity to act as the central political actor in the state. It includes formal constitutional powers, but it is not limited to them. In authoritarian regimes, presidential authority also depends on informal control over elites and institutions, personal legitimacy, and public narratives that present the President's central role as necessary and rightful. Therefore, this thesis treats presidential

authority not as a fixed legal attribute, but as a political relationship that must be continuously maintained and justified.

2.2 Literature review

2.2.1 Authoritarian Resilience, Legitimation, and the Turn to Discourse

In early studies of authoritarianism and totalitarianism (Arendt, 1951; Linz, 2000), a dictatorial rule was primarily identified as repression and ideological mobilization. This static model suggested that citizens obey only through the threat of fear or intensive brainwashing. However, relying solely on physical force is ultimately insufficient to explain long-term stability, since repression is costly and always carries the risk of elite defection. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the field was dominated by the prevailing assumption of an inevitable shift toward liberal democracy, as symbolized by Huntington's (1991) "Third Wave of Democracy" and Fukuyama's (1992) "The End of History." However, entering the 21st century, this transition paradigm faced a profound disconnect from reality. Many non-democratic regimes, particularly in the former Soviet space, not only avoided collapse but also dramatically improved their authoritarian resilience by adopting democratic facades such as elections, multi-party systems, and parliaments. Consequently, modern authoritarianism is now redefined as a persistent political system with its own logic of survival, rather than a mere defective version of democracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The subsequent institutional turn revealed that dictators introduce parliaments and parties for pragmatic governance functions. Gerschewski (2013) argues that research in 1990s has focused on strategic repression and co-optations key factors in regime stability. In a similar way, Levitsky & Way (2010) criticize the democratization bias that treats hybrid regimes in post-Cold War era as cases of "incomplete democratization". They define competitive authoritarianism as a regime that formally has competitive institutions, but where competition remains unfair (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Brancati (2014) further systematized this institutional turn. She organized the reasons why authoritarian regimes adopt these nominally democratic institutions into five mechanisms, and argued that these institutions do not promote democratization but rather strengthen authoritarian rule and prevent democratization (Brancati, 2014). While institutionalism has clarified the physical mechanisms of authoritarian survival, it says less about why citizens

accept non-democratic rule without active resistance. To understand this problem, it is necessary to focus on the discursive aspect of legitimation—how a regime constructs its own legitimacy through language and reshapes public perceptions.

In explaining the persistence of such regimes, Gerschewski (2013) criticized conventional models that rely only on repression and co-optation, reintegrating legitimation as a third pillar. His key contribution lies in shifting the focus from normatively "right" rule to Max Weber's "belief in legitimacy" (Gerschewski, 2013). He also argues that even authoritarian regimes need a certain degree of legitimacy to endure over time (Gerschewski, 2013; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). Therefore, legitimation is brought back into the analysis, but its discursive content remains largely a black box.

Rather than focusing on legitimacy itself, von Soest & Grauvogel (2015; 2017) shift the analytical emphasis to claims to legitimacy, that is, the ways in which regimes seek to justify their rule on particular grounds, and they organize these claims into six dimensions: ideology, foundational myth, personalism, international engagement, procedures, and performance (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2015). This framework is important because it treats authoritarian legitimation as a combination of multiple resources. Omelicheva (2016) connects this type of content-based legitimation research to discourse analysis. She argues that discourses of legitimacy can shape citizen's reasoning and evaluation, and thereby create the conditions under which rule is accepted as "proper" (Omelicheva, 2016). She points out that previous studies have often confused legitimacy, sources of legitimacy, claims to legitimacy, and strategies of legitimation, and calls for greater conceptual clarification. In addition, by comparing the presidential rhetoric of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan through a discursive framework, she shows how performance, democracy, unity, external recognition, and ideology are discursively mobilized (Omelicheva, 2016). This study is important as a discursive analysis of authoritarian legitimation in the Central Asian context. However, it focuses mainly on relatively a relatively stable period, and it does not fully explore the question of how discourses are recontextualized after power succession or crisis. In this respect, Chilton (2004) and Reyes (2011) provide useful methodological resources for making discursive analysis more concrete. Chilton (2004) organizes the functions of political discourse and argues that rule is sustained not only through physical force, but also through the linguistic communication of the right to

be obeyed. Reyes (2011), by contrast, combines CDA, Systemic Functional Linguistics, and anthropological linguistics, and proposes five strategies. This framework is useful because it makes it possible to analyze how justification becomes persuasive through specific linguistic means. However, Reyes (2011) mainly examines United States war discourse and does not directly address re-legitimation after succession or crisis in authoritarian regimes.

In summary, the existing literature can be understood as developing in three broad stages. First, institutional and regime-focus studies showed that authoritarian regimes can strategically use nominally democratic institutions such as elections, legislatures, and parties, but legitimation was often treated as secondary (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Gerschewski, 2013; Brancati, 2014). Second, scholars such as Gerschewski (2013) and von Soest & Grauvogel (2015; 2017) brought legitimation and claims to legitimacy back into the analysis of authoritarian durability, but their discursive content was still not sufficiently examined. Third, scholars such as Omelicheva (2016), Chilton (2004), and Reyes (2011) showed that legitimation is constructed through discourse. However, much of this research still focuses mainly on relatively stable authoritarian regimes or on single speeches, and it has not sufficiently clarified how discursive re-legitimation takes place after the destabilization of shared-power structures. Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by examining how, in post-crisis and post-succession presidential discourse, particular legitimation claims are recontextualized through specific discursive strategies.

2.2.2 Russia: Tandemocracy and the 2011–12 Protests

Existing studies on Russia's tandemocracy generally understand as a distinctive institutional mechanism of power succession rather than either Putin's genuine withdrawal or Medvedev's full independence. As Chaisty (2019) shows, the Russian presidential term limit prohibited only "two consecutive terms," and this provision made Putin's return in 2012 possible. Tandemocracy can therefore be understood as a structure that formally remained within the constitutional order, while in practice preserving the continuity of Putin's power (Chaisty, 2019). In this sense, the arrangement weakened the institutional authority of the presidency by tying authority not to the office itself, but to Putin as an individual. Medvedev,

though formally President, functioned in practice almost as a temporary stand-in for Putin (Chaisty, 2019). In a similar way, Monaghan (2011) argues that it is misleading to interpret the tandem as a conflict between Putin and Medvedev. Instead, he suggests that there was no major policy or ideological divide between them, and that they should rather be understood as part of a unified team (*komanda*). From this perspective, the key issue was not the personal relationship between the two leaders than the weakness of administrative implementation, as decisions from above were not fully transmitted downward and governance became dependent on manual control (Monaghan, 2011). By contrast, another line of research recognizes the reality of power-sharing. In this view, two centers of power—the Kremlin and the White House[3]—coexisted in Russia between 2008 and 2012, and Medvedev did have a certain degree of autonomy, even though Putin's approval remained necessary in key appointments and strategic areas. The tandem should therefore be understood neither as full dual rule nor as complete subordination, but as a limited and asymmetric division of power (Viktorov, 2014).

Several studies further suggest that this ambiguous structure had wider consequences for governance. As institutions of interest representation and negotiation became weaker, policymaking became more dependent on the leadership's "best guess" about what society would accept, and when miscalculations occurred, their consequences were more likely to erupt in the streets (Petrov et al., 2014). Gel'man also describes the Putin–Medvedev period not simply as a superficial dual leadership, but as a "dangerous game" that introduced risks both for legitimacy and for governance within an electoral authoritarian regime (Gel'man, 2015). In his argument, Medvedev's rhetoric of modernization and liberalization raised expectations, but because it lacked real institutional means of implementation, it ultimately deepened the imbalance of the regime (Gel'man, 2015).

The implications of tandemocracy have also been examined through the protests of 2011–12. Here again, the existing literature does not treat these protests simply as a democratization movement, but rather as a phenomenon in which elite division, institutional uncertainty, and popular dissatisfaction intersected. Viktorov (2014) argues that the coexistence of two centers of power created confusion within the elite, and that this

[3] the Russian Government House in Moscow and the base of the prime minister (Viktorov, 2014)

fragmentation contributed to the large-scale demonstrations of the winter of 2011–12. In this reading, some elites who had hoped for Medvedev's re-election also supported the protest movement (Viktorov, 2014). By contrast, Chaisty & Whitefield (2013) describe these events as electoral protests typical of a hybrid regime, while also stressing that they did not necessarily rest on a mass base committed to democratization. Their survey findings suggest that protest supporters were not strong supporters of democratic transition and could even be sympathetic to authoritarian leadership and ethno-nationalism (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2013). A related argument is made in Chaisty's study of presidential term limits, which shows that Putin's third term was widely perceived as the beginning of "endless Putin rule," so that the flexible use of term limits functioned not only as a mechanism of regime stability but also as a focal point of dissatisfaction (Chaisty, 2019).

A more critical interpretation argues that the Medvedev period was not a genuine reform, but as a temporary arrangement that preserved the continuity of Putin's personalized rule. In this view, Medvedev had the ability to speak, but not the ability to act, and the transfer of power exposed the emptiness of the mechanism itself (Shevtsova & Kramer, 2012). Later interpretations push this argument further by suggesting that the regime's response to 2011–12 moved not toward liberalization, but toward a managed restaging of "openness," "competitiveness," and "legitimacy" (Pertsev, 2016). Seen in this way, 2011–12 was not an entry point to democratization, but rather a turning point at which the regime began to manage the form of legitimacy more carefully. Bacon (2012) adds a narrative perspective to these institutional and protest-centered accounts. He argues that the Medvedev did not fundamentally after the broader Putinist narrative, whose core terms remained stability and national unity rather than democracy. Further research showed that Putin's project sought to de-politicize selected political conflicts by translating them into managerial, legal, economic, and technical problems (Makarychev, 2008). Yet these de-politicized components were sustained by a deeper hyper-politicization articulated through political will, sovereignty, and the expansion of state authority (Makarychev, 2008). Makarychev's later assessment of Medvedev adds that Medvedev's alleged liberalism, especially in foreign policy, was not a full value-based liberal project, but a more technocratic and de-politicized mode of engagement that remained constrained by Putin's continued control over key domains (Makarychev, 2012). In this sense,

tandemocracy can be understood not only as an institutional arrangement, but also as a division of roles within a broader ruling narrative.

Taken together, the existing literature has generated important insights as a mechanism of succession, a source of institutional uncertainty, and a setting in which the protests of 2011–12 acquired political meaning. At the same time, the main concern of these studies has been to explain what tandemocracy was and how this mechanism produced uncertainty and contestation. By contrast, the focus of this study is on a different question: how Putin's return and the re-concentration of power were narrated as legitimate after that tandem model came to an end. The purpose is therefore not to determine whether tandemocracy was genuine or a façade, but to examine how the end of the tandem period was discursively transformed into a justification for Putin's third-term presidential authority.

2.2.3 Kazakhstan: Tutelary Regime and January 2022

Research on the 2019 transfer of power in Kazakhstan generally agrees that it should not be understood as a simple presidential change, but rather as a visible tutelary regime (Higashijima & Shiraito, 2025) in which Nazarbayev retained influence as *Elbasy* and Chairman of the Security Council while sharing power with Tokayev. This succession model was sustained not only by Nazarbayev's personal authority, but also by the continuing influence of his family members, close associates, and the institutional base of the First President's Chancellery, later known as *Biblioteka* (Abishev et al.,2024; Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022). Although Tokayev initially accepted a number of politically costly concessions, including the renaming of the capital and Dariga Nazarbayeva's appointment to the Senate speakership, he gradually moved to consolidate his own authority, which sharpened the struggle between *Biblioteka* and AK Orda, the presidential office (Abishev et al., 2024). Higashijima & Shiraito (2025) demonstrate that this tutelary regime did not necessarily increase mass support. This finding suggests that even when tutelary succession is designed as an institution, it does not automatically become a source of legitimacy. By contrast, Abishev et al. (2024) describe the 2019-2022 transition as a planned succession based on a regency model, and argue that its overly intrusive authoritarian rules produced elite disunity, which

eventually led to the January 2022 protest. Caron (2023) similarly describes the 2019 transition as a carefully managed succession that was initially intended to preserve Nazarbayev's legacy, but which after the January 2022 events developed into a process of "de-Nazarbayevification," thereby showing how fragile inherited political legacies can be in authoritarian regimes.

Beginning in Zhanaozen in western Kazakhstan on January 4, 2022, and initially triggered by the sharp rise in state-regulated fuel prices, the January protest has been interpreted in the literature not as a sudden riot, but as a compound crisis in which long-accumulated grievances and the internal vulnerabilities of the regime surfaced at once. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022), for instance, explain the background of the protests through the collapse of regime-society relations, arguing that the Nazarbayev regime failed to reconcile its neoliberal prosperity rhetoric with citizens' expectations of a welfare state. Sheryazdanova et al. (2024) develop this social explanation further by understanding January as a crisis of political participation, produced by accumulated socioeconomic and political grievances. Similarly, Ibadildin & Primiano (2024), while recognizing these mass grievances, analyze Kazakhstan as a political-economic system controlled by narrow elite power and conceptualize January as a crisis in which social discontent intersected with an elite split. By contrast, another line of interpretation locates the core problem in Nazarbayev's succession design itself. Abishev et al. (2024) argue that the succession mechanism deepened mistrust between the predecessor and the successor and ultimately turned the January 2022 into the concluding event of the power transfer. Furthermore, after January 5, the protests in Almaty moved into a qualitatively different phase, in which an elite struggle between Nazarbayev loyalists and Tokayev faction came to the forefront (Ibadildin & Primiano, 2024). In this sense, the existing literature understands January 2022 not as spontaneous unrest, but as a complex crisis shaped by socioeconomic grievances, a crisis of political participation, a fragile tutelary model, elite disunity, and coercive fragmentation.

Troitskiy et al. (2024), using critical discourse analysis to examine the social media discourse of Kazakhstan's political analysts after the Bloody January, argue that the dominant expert discourse largely reproduced the official narrative and organized the crisis through the dichotomies of "the old" versus "the new" and "the weak" versus "the strong." In this discourse, the "old" was associated with the Nazarbayev-era order, old elites, corruption, nepotism, and

ineffectiveness, while the "new" linked to Tokayev, reform, justice, and the idea of "New Kazakhstan." Tokayev also moved quickly against the Nazarbayev faction. He arrested Karim Massimov, took over the Security Council, and began a "cleansing" of the security organization. The broader process of "de-Nazarbayevification" then stripped Nazarbayev of his special constitutional status and repealed the law on the First President–Elbasy (Abishev et al., 2024). Caron (2023) likewise notes that this process included the loss of Nazarbayev's title and privileges, the renaming of the capital back from Nur-Sultan to Astana, and a purge of several of his close allies and family members.

Finally, although it is not the main focus of this study, research on foreign relations also understands Kazakhstan in 2019-2022 not only through the lens of domestic transition, but also through foreign policy continuity and adjustment (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). From this perspective, Tokayev's multi-vector foreign policy is seen as basically continuing Nazarbayev's line, while at the same time moving in a more institutionalized and geo-economic direction (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024). In this sense, "New Kazakhstan" can be understood not only as a slogan of domestic reform, but also as an effort to rebuild a more sovereign and autonomous international self-image.

Taken together, the existing literature on Kazakhstan in 2019–2022 understands the post-Nazarbayev system as a fragile shared-power structures, explains the January 2022 events as a compound crisis in which social grievances, a crisis of political participation, elite conflict, and security-sector fragmentation intersected, and reads the discourse of "New Kazakhstan" as a tool for the legitimation of the Tokayev regime. What still remains underexplored is how Tokayev, through presidential discourse, recontextualized this crisis and the reorganization of the regime, and how he used this process to re-legitimate his own rule. This is the main gap addressed by this research. To examine it, the next chapter presents the methodology of the study. It explains the research design, the data collection, and limitations by using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for tracing how re-legitimation claims.

3 Methodology

This chapter presents the research design, case selection, and analytical methods used to examine the destabilization of shared-power structures in Russia and Kazakhstan, along with the subsequent process of discursive re-legitimation. The previous chapter outlined the theoretical framework that forms the foundation of this study. First, it established that authoritarian regimes maintain their rule not only through physical force but also through an active process of legitimation. Specifically, it discussed shared-power structures in authoritarian regimes, such as Russia's tandemocracy and Kazakhstan's tutelary regime, contain inherent tensions that may become visible in moments of protest and violence. In this context, existing grounds of legitimacy may lose its power, while new claims to legitimacy emerge. The previous chapter further suggested that such shifts are not only political but also discursive: legitimacy is reworked through narratives that reinterpret protests, reframe the predecessor's legacy, and justify a new authority.

Building on these theoretical considerations, the purpose of this chapter is to establish the empirical methods needed to explain how political narratives contextualize a destabilized order and justify a new political one. The chapter is organized as follows. First, Section 3.1 presents the qualitative comparative case study design. It also describes the use of Critical Discourse Analysis and the two-level coding strategy, combining four basic codes with Van Leeuwen's categories (2007) of legitimation to examine in discourse. Section 3.2 then explains the data collection process and the construction of the corpus. This section details how text data, such as official speeches and statements, are collected and analyzed. Finally, Section 3.3 discusses the limitations of this study within authoritarian contexts where information transparency is restricted.

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative comparative case study to explain how presidential authority is discursively re-legitimated after the destabilization of shared-power structures in authoritarian regimes. It focuses on Russia after the 2011–2012 protests and Putin's return to the presidency, and on Kazakhstan after the gradual erosion of the Nazarbayev-Tokayev

tutelary regime, especially following the January 2022 protests. Rather than treating both cases simply as destabilized shared-power structures, this study compares two different but related forms of shared-power rule: Russia's tandemocracy and Kazakhstan's tutelary regime.

The case selection is based on the analytical relevance of Russia and Kazakhstan for examining re-legitimation after the destabilization of shared-power structures. Both Russia and Kazakhstan share a Soviet legacy, operate as authoritarian regimes by long-serving dominant leaders, political system in which authority was divided between a predecessor and a successor. Furthermore, both shared-power structures end up with moments of public contestation. In Russia, the Medvedev-Putin tandem created an ambiguous division between formal presidential office and Putin's continuing political authority (Viktorov, 2014). In Kazakhstan, Nazarbayev's post-presidential role as *Elbasy* status and Chairman of the Security Council created a tutelary regime that constrained Tokayev's presidency (Abishev et al., 2024; Higashijima & Shiraito, 2025). In both cases, these arrangements came under pressure during moments of public contestation. This makes the two cases useful for examining how presidential authority was discursively reconstructed when shared-power structures became unstable.

Because this study asks not only what Presidents said, but how their claims made protest, predecessor legacies, and renewed presidential authority intelligible, it adopts a discourse analytical approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Institutional and public communication is an element of social life that is connected to social practices, social relations, and institutional contexts rather than as language separated from politics and society (Fairclough, 2003). This perspective fits the empirical analysis because the thesis examines presidential discourses as texts that define political problems, represent the past, construct the President as a legitimate actor, and present a particular political order as necessary. Milliken (1999) treats discourse as a system of signification that constructs objects, subjects, and possible forms of action (Milliken 1999). Specifically, CDA in political contexts examines how power relations are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, or challenged through text in social and political contexts (Van Dijk, 2015). This study therefore treats presidential discourse as a site where protests are contextualized and transformed into arguments for renewed presidential authority.

The analysis is organized through two-level coding. The first level consists of four codes: problem framing, legacy framing, leadership claim, and political order configuration. These codes are designed to operationalize the research question by showing how presidential authority is reconstructed in discourse after the destabilization of shared-power structures. The first code is problem framing, which examines how presidential discourse defines the main problems that require political action or legitimation. It is important because the way a problem is defined also shapes what kind of response can appear necessary, lawful, or reasonable. In this sense, problem framing is closely connected to CDA, because political discourse does not only describe events but also gives them political meaning (Van Dijk, 2015). The second code is legacy framing, which examines how the predecessor, the previous regime, and the broader past are positioned in relation to the present and future. This code captures whether the predecessor's legacy is presented as a source of continuity and stability, as a historical achievement, as an outdated model, as a burden, or as a cause of problems that must be corrected. Since the successor's authority may remain tied to the predecessor's legacy in shared-power structures, even after a formal transfer of office, this code is especially important. This code is developed for the specific purpose of this thesis, but it is informed by the literature on authoritarian legitimacy claims. It is especially connected to von Soest & Grauvogel's discussion of foundational myths, historical achievements, performance, and personal leadership as possible resources for regime legitimation (von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017). The third code is leadership claim. It examines how the presidential discourse constructs the President as a legitimate actor capable of responding to the identified problems. This code focuses on how the President claims mandate, responsibility, competence, and right to act. It captures whether the President is presented as a guardian of stability, a restorer of order, a reformer, a corrector of past mistakes, a representative of the people, or the actor capable of managing transition and reform. The fourth code is political order configuration, which examines how presidential discourse reconstructs the rules, boundaries, and institutional arrangement of politics. This code is different from leadership claim because it does not focus mainly on the President as an individual actor. Instead, it focuses on how the wider political order is recognized around presidential authority. In the analyzed texts before protests, this code is used to identify the existing configuration of political order before protest, such as the

role of state institutions and the place of the presidency within the political system. In the post-protest texts, it then traces how this order is reconfigured, defended, or corrected after destabilization of shared-power structures. It asks which institutions are presented as legitimate channels of political action, how presidential centrality is restored or strengthened, and what values are used to justify this structure, such as legality, sovereignty, security, stability, or national unity.

The second level of coding applies Van Leeuwen's framework of legitimation across these four codes. Van Leeuwen's categories: authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis are used to examine how the claims identified by the four codes are made legitimate in presidential discourse (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Authorization refers to legitimation by reference to authority, including tradition, custom, law, regulations, institutional office, or persons who are recognized as having authority. Moral evaluation refers to legitimation grounded in specific moral value systems. It avoids explicit debate and instead implicitly links actions to moral goodness by implying adjectives such as "normal," "natural," or "beneficial." Rationalization is legitimation based on the purpose, utility, effectiveness, or cognitive validity of an action, focusing on the logic of means and goals. Mythopoesis refers to legitimation given through narratives. It persuades people through "moral tales," where rightful actions are rewarded with a happy ending, or "cautionary tales," where breaking the rules results in bad outcomes.

The purpose of coding is to make the comparative interpretation of presidential discourse more systematic and transparent. Each text is read in its political context and coded according to how it defines the political problem, positions the predecessor's legacy, constructs the President as a legitimate actor, and organizes political order around renewed presidential authority. The analysis therefore identifies the discursive function of specific passages and shows how presidential discourse transforms protest and unrest into arguments for re-legitimation. The coding framework and a comparative summary of the coding results are provided in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary sources consist of official speeches, addresses, statements, and officially attributed programmatic texts by Presidents or presidential candidates. The focus is therefore on texts in which presidential authority is publicly transferred, claimed, defended, or articulated. The selection of materials is based on three criteria to construct the principal corpus. First, the text must have authoritative status. This means that it must be officially published or archived by a presidential or governmental source, or otherwise clearly attributed to the relevant leader. Second, the text must be temporally relevant to the period of shared-power structures, political unrest, and re-legitimation. Third, the text must have a clear function in constructing presidential authority. In this analysis, this refers to one of three types of public texts:

✓ **Mandate texts**: speeches or statements delivered at the moments of succession, inauguration, election, or renewed mandate. These texts are included because they publicly established who is entitled to rule and how presidential authority is transferred or renewed.

✓ **Policy agenda setting texts**: State of the Nation Addresses, Addresses to the Federal Assembly, and officially attributed programmatic texts, including presidential campaign articles. The first two are constitutionally grounded speeches through which Presidents define the state of the country and outline the main directions of policy (Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Art. 44; Constitution of the Russian Federation, Art. 84). Campaign articles are included when they similarly set policy priorities and articulate a claim to future presidential authority. In Russia's case, Putin's 2012 presidential campaign articles are included as policy agenda-setting texts. Although several of these articles were originally published in newspapers rather than on the Kremlin website, they are treated as part of the principal corpus because they were authored by Putin, publicly attributed to him, and functioned as programmatic texts that articulated his claim to future presidential authority.

✓ **Crisis response texts**: speeches or official statements that address the 2011–2012 protests in Russia and the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan, showing how leaders interpret destabilizing events and justify political action in response to them.

The Russia's case requires a more complex temporal structure than the Kazakhstan's case. In Kazakhstan, the January 2022 events provide a relatively clear dividing line between the pre-protest tutelary period and the post-protest re-legitimation period. In Russia, however,

the 2011-2012 protest wave unfolded across two electoral moments: the December 2011 State Duma election and the March 2012 presidential election. Moreover, the formal end of tandemocracy occurred with Putin's inauguration in May 2012. For this reason, in the Russia's case, the period from the beginning of the 2011 protest wave to Putin's inauguration is treated as part of the shared-power structures, since Medvedev still formally held the presidency. However, Putin's campaign-related texts from this period are analyzed as part of the post-protest discourse, because they were already oriented toward the political order that would follow the end of tandemocracy and toward re-legitimation of Putin's renewed presidential authority.

In Kazakhstan's case, the baseline phase is counted from Tokayev's assumption of the presidency in March 2019 to the end of 2021. This period is used to examine how Tokayev's authority was legitimated under the continuing shadow of Nazarbayev's tutelary role. The unrest and re-legitimation period begin with the January 2022 events and continues through the constitutional reform process, and Tokayev's renewed presidential mandate in November 2022.

The principal corpus is therefore composed of texts by Medvedev, Putin, and Tokayev that meet the three criteria described above. Not every official text produced during these periods is included in the principal corpus. Party congresses, popular-front meetings, campaign rallies, ceremonial commemorations, holiday addresses, state decoration speeches, and routine sectoral policy documents are excluded unless they directly belong to one of the three presidential legitimation occasions defined above. This exclusion is necessary because the study focuses on presidential authority, not party authority, campaign organization, or national symbolism in general. Such materials may still be consulted as contextual sources, but they are not treated as equivalent to presidential addresses or programmatic presidential texts.

In addition to the principal corpus, this study uses supplementary contextual primary materials. These include official statements, interviews, articles, and speeches by senior political actors such as foreign ministers, presidential spokespersons, state counsellors, parliamentary leaders, and other regime-linked figures. These materials are not part of the main corpus and are not analyzed in the same way as presidential discourse. They are used only to

contextualize the presidential narrative, clarify how it was reproduced across the political hierarchy, or support the interpretation of specific political developments.

Various secondary and contextual materials are also used to properly place them within their social context. Political system evaluation reports serve as indicators to understand the objective political situation at the time the discourse was created—such as election fraud or the suppression of protests. Furthermore, existing academic knowledge in regional studies provides essential reference points for understanding structural changes, such as the destabilization of shared-power structures. Archived election programs and policy announcements from official government websites also clarify the institutional framework that existed when the texts were released. Discourse does not exist in isolation, rather it is a practice that functions within specific political and institutional contexts (Van Dijk, 2015). Therefore, contextual information from secondary sources serves as the foundation for critically reading how the analyzed texts maintain existing power or reproduce unequal power relations.

3.3 Limitations

Regarding the potential limitations of this research, the first significant challenge involves the nature and scope of the source material. This study relies primarily on official presidential speeches, addresses, campaign articles, and officially attributed programmatic texts. These materials are suitable for examining how presidential authority was publicly justified from above, but they do not provide direct access to backstage political bargaining, private negotiations, or informal decision-making between predecessors, successors and ruling elites. Political discourse is a form of institutional and public communication shaped by specific contextual requirements and media presentation. Therefore, official texts should not be treated as transparent records of internal regime politics (Fetzer, 2013). To reduce the risk of relying on incomplete or unstable online sources, this study uses official presidential websites and archived versions of texts when necessary. However, the analysis remains limited to what was publicly articulated in official discourse. A related limitation concerns the scope of the discourse analyzed in this study. Since the research question focuses on the discursive construction of presidential authority, the analysis concentrates mainly on presidential

speeches, official addresses, and officially attributed programmatic texts. This means that the thesis examines legitimation claims from above, rather than broader political discourse including opposition discourse, mass media, social media, and broader public reactions. Therefore, this study can show how Putin, Medvedev, and Tokayev attempted to make presidential authority appear legitimate, but it cannot determine whether these claims were accepted by citizens, opposition actors, state elites, or society.

Secondly, there are inherent limitations concerning the interpretation of linguistic and cultural nuances. For the Kazakhstan case, the analysis primarily utilizes official English and Russian-language documents provided by government sources. As the author is not a speaker of Kazakh, that language is used only for reference purposes, and the systematic analysis is conducted through English and Russian texts. In contrast, the analysis of the Russian case is mainly conducted using original Russian-language materials. While these materials are central to the research, the author is not a native speaker of Russian. To address this, the analysis is supported by secondary resources, such as dictionaries and reference materials, and includes consultations with native speakers to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations. Nevertheless, relying on English or Russian versions of contexts carries the risk that certain historical, political, or rhetorical nuances unique to the Kazakh and Russian language may be overlooked.

Third, the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) itself is not a purely objective or positivist approach, as it inherently involves the researcher's own process of interpretation. Fairclough (2003) emphasizes that discourse analysis is a tool for social research to describe the intrinsic connection between textual and social processes, meaning that the analyst's own perspective and background will inevitably influence the final analysis.

Finally, there are constraints regarding the generalization of the findings. This study focuses on specific critical moments in Russia (2011–2012) and Kazakhstan (2022) characterized by the instability and eventual collapse of tutelary structures. While the insights gained from these two cases provide significant value for explaining re-legitimation processes during power transitions in other authoritarian contexts, they may not be directly applicable to all dictatorships, especially those with fundamentally different political cultures or institutional backgrounds. As Omelicheva (2016) suggests, the discourse of legitimation is deeply rooted in the unique historical contexts and collective memories of each nation. Therefore, the shifts in

discursive strategies identified in this study primarily illustrate the dynamics of the dismantling of shared-power structures within the post-Soviet space, and their universal validity should be evaluated with caution.

4 Analysis

The previous chapters provided the theoretical and methodological basis for this study. They clarified the concepts of legitimacy and legitimation, discussed the fragility of shared-power structures, and situated the cases of Russia and Kazakhstan within the wider literature on authoritarian resilience and discourse. They also explained the comparative case-study design and the use of Critical Discourse Analysis through the combination of four framing codes and Van Leeuwen's framework. Against this background, this chapter turns to the empirical analysis. It examines how presidential discourse in Russia and Kazakhstan reinterpreted protest, crisis, and the predecessor's legacy in order to justify a renewed concentration of authority. To do so, it first identifies the main discursive patterns before the central episode of contestation and then analyzes how these patterns changed after the shared-power structures became unstable.

4.1 Case Study 1: Russia

4.1.1 Medvedev's Legitimating Discourse and Its Connection to the 2011–12 Protests

Before examining the discourse of re-legitimation after the 2011-12 protests in Russia, it is necessary to clarify how presidential power was legitimized during the Medvedev period. This section looks at Medvedev's 2008 inaugural address, his 2009 article "Russia, Forward!" (*Rossiya, vperyod!*), and the Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation of 2009 and 2010. Using the four analytical codes, this section shows that Medvedev's pre-protest discourse constructed presidential authority through a combination of future-oriented reform, continuity within the tandemocracy order, and controlled state-led change. Across these texts, the presidency was presented as the actor that could identify problems, organize modernization, and guide Russia toward renewal.

At the level of problem framing, in the 2008 inaugural address, the central task is to continue Russia's development on the basis of law, freedom, and state responsibility. Medvedev begins with the presidential oath and invokes Article 2 of the Russian Constitution, which defines human rights and freedoms as the highest value. Presidential authority is justified through law, constitutional duty, and the office itself. The political problem is therefore framed in relatively general terms: Russia needs further development, modernization, and responsible state action, but not a break with the existing order. By referring to the foundation created over the previous eight years and by thanking Putin for his support, Medvedev places his presidency within continuity rather than rupture. At the level of legacy framing, the inaugural address therefore presents the recent past as a stabilized basis on which the new presidency can build.
In the 2009 article *Russia, Forward!* Medvedev's discourse shifts away from the mainly constitutional framing of the 2008 inaugural address and becomes much more strongly oriented toward modernization as a future project. The main problems of Russia are presented as internal rather than external: a primitive raw-material economy, chronic corruption, paternalist habits, weak democratic institutions, low civic self-organization, demographic decline, and technological stagnation. Published in the aftermath of the global economic crisis, the article treats that crisis not simply as a temporary shock, but as a revealing moment that exposes the long-term weakness of the existing model. At the level of problem framing, this is a major shift, because Russia's central problem is now defined as structural backwardness. Medvedev repeatedly explains why the present system is inadequate, why reform is necessary, and how modernization is expected to improve Russia's future. At the same time, this recognition is reinforced by moral language, since corruption, passivity, and weak legal culture are described not only as obstacles to efficiency, but as social vices that hold Russia back. At the level of leadership claim, Medvedev appears more clearly as the actor who can identify these weaknesses and set a strategic direction beyond them. The article also uses historical references, but mainly in support of the modernization argument. Medvedev invokes the Great Patriotic War, earlier state-led modernizations under Peter the Great, the tsars, and the Bolsheviks, and Russia's historical role in world affairs in order to argue that Russia has both the inheritance and the obligation to overcome backwardness. At the level of legacy framing, the past is therefore used as a resource for justifying a future-oriented national project. Yet this future is

not framed as revolutionary rupture, since Medvedev explicitly distances himself from "permanent revolution" and insists that political change must be gradual, thoughtful, step-by-step, and non-violent. At the level of political order configuration, the article therefore legitimates a model of controlled reform, in which modernization is necessary but must remain within a managed and state-led framework.

The two annual addresses of 2009 and 2010 develop the modernization line of *Russia, Forward!* into a more official and practical form. In the 2009 address, Medvedev explicitly states that, two months earlier, he had presented the principles of a new political strategy and that he now wanted to set out the concrete priority plans for its implementation. This is important because it shows that presidential authority is justified not only through the promise of modernization, but also through the claim that the presidency can turn a general strategic vision into an official program of state action. At the level of leadership claim, the President is no longer only the actor who identifies the problem, but the actor who can translate strategy into coordinated policy. In the 2009 address, Medvedev argues that Russia must attain the status of a "world power on a fundamentally new basis" and insists that the country's prestige and national well-being can no longer depend on past achievements alone. Instead of continuing to live from Soviet-era resources and inherited infrastructures, he claimed that Russia must move toward "smart economy", "smart politics", and a more modern society. At the level of legacy framing, the inherited past is therefore no longer sufficient. The future becomes a necessary choice between renewal and decline.

The 2010 address keeps this basic structure, but gives it a more administrative and socially concrete form. The speech links modernization to technological development, innovation, energy efficiency, healthcare, education, social policy, and better public administration. At the level of problem framing, the key issue is no longer only backwardness in the abstract, but the practical need to make modernization deliver visible and socially meaningful results. In this sense, Medvedev appears not as a revolutionary reformer, but as the President who can guide Russia toward a more modern and more prosperous future from within the existing order. Pynnöniemi(2014) argues that Medvedev's modernization discourse often relied more on projecting an attractive future than on articulating deep political transformation. It helps explain why the 2010 address remains strongly reformist in tone while still being bounded within

change from above. At the level of political order configuration, reform is presented as desirable, socially necessary, and future-oriented, but still obeyed to coordination from above. Moral language is also more visible in these two annual addresses than in the 2009 article. Modernization is framed not only as economically useful, but also as ethically necessary for pensioners, veterans, the unemployed, children, families, and future generations. This gives Medvedev's pre-protest discourse a protective and paternal tone.

Taken together, Medvedev's pre-protest discourse constructed presidential authority through four connected patterns. At the level of problem framing, Russia was increasingly described as suffering from backwardness, inefficiency, and delayed development. At the level of legacy framing, Medvedev combined continuity with the stabilized tandem order and a forward-looking narrative of renewal. At the level of leadership claim, the President was presented as the actor who could identify weaknesses, set priorities, and convert strategy into state-led reform. At the level of political order configuration, the resulting model was legal, reformist, and future-oriented, but always within the boundaries of gradual, coordinated, and controlled change from above. This point is crucial for the next section. When protest emerged in 2011-12, the problem was not only that the regime faced public discontent, but also that this future-oriented discourse of managed modernization had to be reworked under far more unstable political conditions.

4.1.2 Discourse after the 2011-12 Protests and presidential election

The 2011–12 protests marked a discursive turning point in Russia. If Medvedev's late-tandem discourse had still framed political authority through modernization, reform, and a managed opening, Putin's return to the presidency was accompanied by a different strategy of legitimation. This section examines how the discourse of political authority was reworked during the transition between the beginning of the 2011-2012 protest wave and Putin's address 12 December. It focuses on Medvedev's Address to the Federal Assembly of 22 December 2011, Medvedev's the 2 March 2012 address, Putin's 2012 presidential campaign articles, the inauguration ceremony of 7 May 2012, and the Presidential Address to Federal Assembly of 12 December 2012. Read together, these texts make it possible to trace the broader re-

legitimation of supreme political authority from the late tandem period to the restored presidency of Putin. It is important to analyze both Medvedev and Putin here. The protest wave began while Medvedev was still President, and his final annual address shows how the late tandemocracy discourse tried to contain public dissatisfaction through controlled reform and bounded political opening. Putin's texts, by contrast, move the response to protest into a broader programmatic narrative. They gradually redefine the unstable moment as a question of how to preserve Russia as a sovereign, governable, socially cohesive, and internationally respected state after the tandemocracy period.

The 2011 annual address retains important elements of Medvedev's modernization discourse, but it speaks from a more unstable political moment. It was delivered after the December 2011 parliamentary elections and after mass demonstrations had already begun across the country, driven by allegations of election fraud and dissatisfaction with the results and reported irregularities (OSCE/ODIHR[4], 2012a, 2012b). In this context, Medvedev does not abandon modernization as a state project, since he still presents economic renewal, technological development, and social reform as central tasks for Russia's future. At the same time, the speech gives this agenda a more defensive political meaning by tying it more closely to legality, order, and controlled reform from above in the context of growing public dissatisfaction.

At the level of problem framing, Medvedev redefines the meaning of protest itself. He does not treat the demonstrations as an exceptional political challenge to the regime, nor does he address allegations of fraud directly. Instead, he normalizes public dissatisfaction by suggesting that such reactions accompany elections in general. At the same time, he narrows the acceptable space of protest by linking its illegitimate forms to manipulation, social hostility, provocateurs, extremists, and outside interference. In Van Leeuwen's terms, this works mainly through moral evaluation: lawful criticism and civic activity are coded as part of democratic maturation. Protest is therefore not treated as an autonomous democratic challenge from below, but as something that must either be incorporated into state-managed reform or excluded as a

[4] The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe/Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

threat to political order. In this sense, the speech presents the presidency as the only institution capable of interpreting social discontent and preserving democracy without chaos.

At the level of legacy framing, Medvedev organizes the speech around his own presidential term and the crises that shaped it, especially the August 2008 war and the global financial crisis that followed soon after. He presents the record of the previous four years through economic recovery, demographic improvement, social support, political reform, anti-corruption measures, military modernization, and foreign-policy achievements, which gives his presidency the shape of responsible management under difficult conditions. According to Van Leeuwen's framework, this is mainly rationalization. Presidential authority is justified through problem-solving capacity, achieved results, and the practical necessity of continuing modernization. The speech therefore links the present to an ongoing project of renewal.

At the level of leadership claim, Medvedev presents the presidency as the office that hears demands for change and converts them into lawful reform from above. He explicitly says that he hears those who call for change and understands them, and he immediately follows this with a concrete set of political initiatives, including direct gubernatorial elections, easier party registration, lower signature requirements, changes in the composition of election commissions, decentralization, anti-corruption controls, and "open government" mechanisms. In this way, reform is linked more closely to presidential initiative, because change appears as something the presidency can define and lead rather than something imposed from below by protest alone.

At the level of political order configuration, the speech justifies a model of controlled democratization built around legality, reform, and presidential guidance. Medvedev, as mentioned above, welcomes greater civic activity and describes it as a sign of democratic "maturation," but he places this activity inside a political order in which criticism must remain lawful, elections must be honest and transparent, and reform must proceed through state institutions rather than through uncontrolled pressure in the streets. The 2 March 2012 address repeats this logic by presenting high civic activity as evidence that Russian society has become more mature. The address therefore keeps the language of modernization, but gives it a narrower political meaning by tying renewal more firmly to order, legality, and controlled reform under presidential leadership.

Putin's seven campaign articles about Russia's general challenge to face, ethnic problems, economy, democracy, social policy, national security, and foreign policy, should be read as a connected discourse of re-legitimation. Shortly after the Duma election, Putin briefly addressed the protests at the meeting of the Coordinating Council of the All-Russia People's Front (ONF). He recognized the right of citizens to express their views within the law, but presented protest as acceptable only if it stayed within the law and the order, warning that Russians did not want chaos like Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine (Government of the Russian Federation, 2011, December 8).

At the level of problem framing, Putin's campaign discourse re-signified the post-2011 contestation not as an autonomous democratic protest, but as part of a broader historical problem facing Russia: the danger of revolutionary rupture, elite irresponsibility, weak civic control, and state vulnerability. "*A recurring problem in Russian history has been the elites' desire to achieve sudden change, a revolution rather than sustained development."* (Putin, 2012, January 16). This danger is contrasted with another negative tendency: stagnation, dependency, non-competitive elites, and corruption. In this binary structure, both revolutionary disruption and stagnant preservation are delegitimized, while state-led reform is presented as the only responsible alternative. The framing works through several of Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies at once. It uses moral evaluation by coding "revolution", "sudden change", "stagnation," and "corruption" as irresponsible and destructive. It also uses rationalization by presenting controlled reform as the necessary means for stable national development. Finally, it relies on mythopoesis, especially through the repeated use of the 1990s as a cautionary story: rapid political opening without state capacity is associated not with democracy, but with oligarchy, anarchy, and state weakness. In this way, the central issue is shifted from "Were the elections fair?" to "What kind of democracy can prevent state collapse?" Putin's return is therefore re-legitimated not as resistance to change, but as protection against destructive forms of change.

A similar mechanism appears in Putin's treatment of civic dissatisfaction. He does not simply deny social activism. Instead, Putin converts civic dissatisfaction into a problem of institutional responsiveness rather than political contestation. Society is allowed to demand

influence, but this influence is framed as input into state decision-making, not as autonomous opposition to the political center.

Democracy, in my view, consists both in the fundamental right of the people to choose power and in the possibility of continuously influencing power and the process of its decision-making. This means that democracy must have mechanisms of permanent and direct action, effective channels of dialogue, public control, communication and 'feedback'[5] (Putin, 2012, February 6).

The key point is that participation is legitimate only when it is channeled into dialogue, public control, feedback, consultation, and professional expertise within state-recognized procedures. Thus, Putin's re-legitimation during the 2011-2012 protests does not work by openly rejecting civic activity. Rather, it converts protest into governable participation. Opposition is not recognized as an autonomous counter power, but criticism becomes acceptable when it is constructive, institutionalized, and incorporated into state decision-making. Therefore, Putin absorbs the protest moment into a discourse of responsible reform, state capacity, and managed participation, thereby depriving protest of independent political subjectivity while still claiming to respond to society's demand for change.

At the level of legacy framing, Putin's discourse is also built on a logic that partly overlaps with Medvedev's but leads to a different political conclusion. Like Medvedev, Putin describes the 1990s as a negative historical reference point: a period of economic decline, weak statehood, oligarchic capture, and loss of control. The 2000s, by contrast, are presented as a period of recovery, stabilization and restoration. However, while Medvedev's discourse had used this recovered stability as a basis for technological modernization with a more-future-oriented vocabulary of openness, Putin's campaign discourse redefines the next stage of development through sovereignty and state strength. This is the point at which Putin changes the meaning of modernization. In his discourse, the future should not be a liberal break from the Putin-era order, nor a return to stagnation. He subordinates it to sovereignty. Economic

[5] Original Russian: «Демократия, на мой взгляд, заключается как в фундаментальном праве народа выбирать власть, так и в возможности непрерывно влиять на власть и процесс принятия ею решений. А значит, демократия должна иметь механизмы постоянного и прямого действия, эффективные каналы диалога, общественного контроля, коммуникаций и "обратной связи"». Translation by author

renewal, democratic mechanisms, and social development are possible only under the protection of a strong state. The memory of the 1990s is used to argue that modernization without state capacity can produce collapse, while modernization under strong sovereign leadership can preserve the achievements of the 2000s.

This logic is also visible in the way Putin describes Russia and the global world. Putin states that Russia is part of the larger world economically, informationally, and culturally, and that it does not want to isolate itself. However, this openness is immediately conditioned by sovereignty. Russia will act according to its own interests and goals, not according to decisions dictated by others. Thus Putin's discourse links three elements: domestic order, sovereign statehood, and resistance to Western interventionism. NATO[6] expansion, missile defense plans, and Western humanitarian interventions are presented as threats to international trust, state sovereignty, and legal-moral order. The Arab Spring and the 2011 Libyan civil war then function as cautionary examples. Putin acknowledges that the Arab Spring was initially perceived with hope, but argues that democratic hopes were soon replaced by external intervention, coups, and violent regime change. Therefore, the 2012 campaign articles show that Putin's third-term discourse began with a strong suspicion toward externally supported political transformation and with the belief that sovereignty must be defended against both domestic destabilization and international intervention. It shows the paradox that de-politicized language of rules, law, markets, and cooperation coexists with a hyper-politicization of sovereignty (Makarychev, 2008). In Van Leeuwen's terms, this again combines rationalization and mythopoesis: sovereignty is rationalized as the necessary condition for security and development, while international examples such as Libya are turned into warning narratives about what happens when sovereignty is violated.

From the perspective of leadership claim, Putin's discourse reconstructs Russia itself as the object that presidential authority must protect. Putin contrasts Russia with Western multiculturalism, which he presents as unable to integrate diversity and as producing social fragmentation. Russia, however, is described as fundamentally different. Its national and migration problems are said to be connected to the collapse of the USSR[7] and, more broadly,

[6] The North Atlantic Treaty Organization
[7] The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

to the collapse of historical "Great Russia" (*bol'shaia Rossiia*). This argument elevates the preservation of Russia's multiethnic unity into a historical and moral task. Putin's reference to the Time of Troubles gives this discourse a clear mythopoetic structure. He quotes Klyuchevsky's idea that,

Yet even at the moment when the state as an institution was critically weakened, Russia did not disappear. What occurred was what Vasily Kliuchevsky had described in relation to the first Russian Time of Troubles: "When the political bonds of public order broke down, the country was saved by the moral will of the people."[8] (Putin, 2012, January 23)

The narrative implies that Russia survives when its people overcome internal division and recognize themselves as one civic nation. This matters for re-legitimation because the justification of Putin's renewed leadership no longer rests only on authorization by election. Authorization remains present, since the campaign is formally tied to the presidential election. Yet the campaign discourse goes beyond ordinary electoral legitimacy. Putin is constructed as the actor who can protect Russia from three forms of disintegration: revolutionary political rupture, economic stagnation, and civilizational fragmentation. His return is therefore presented not merely as an electoral outcome, but as a necessary re-centering of authority after the instability of the tandemocracy period and the shock of protest.

Once Putin secured his third presidential term, his re-legitimation discourse continued in the same way, but with a different function. The campaign articles had formulated the problem, while the inauguration and the December 2012 Address converted this discourse into restored presidential authority. The inauguration consolidates the legacy framing developed in the campaign articles. Putin absorbs the tandem period into a longer narrative of national recovery. Putin presents Russia as having regained its dignity and re-emerged as a renewed great nation, and Medvedev's presidency is framed as a period that preserved continuity, stability, and modernization. This is a clear case of rationalization and mythopoesis. Medvedev's Presidency is rationalized by its function, such as continuity, stability, and

[8] Original Russian: «Однако даже в тот момент, когда государство как институт критически ослабело, Россия не исчезла. Произошло то, о чем Василий Ключевский говорил применительно к первой русской Смуте: "Когда надломились политические скрепы общественного порядка, страна была спасена нравственной волей народа"». Translation by author.

modernization, while the broader story is mythopoetic. Russia has passed through hardship, recovered dignity, and entered a new stage of national development.

The December 2012 Address develops this logic more clearly. Here, Putin's discourse moves from the restoration of presidential authority to the moral and historical consolidation of the political order.

Russia must be a sovereign and influential country. We should not just develop with confidence, but also preserve our national and spiritual identity, not lose our sense of national unity. We must be and remain Russia (Putin, 2012, December 12).

Development remains important, but it is subordinated to sovereignty, identity, and historical continuity. In Van Leeuwen's framework, this is primarily moral evaluation and supported by authorization of tradition. The restored political order is legitimized through values of sovereignty, spiritual identity, national unity, and continuity with Russia's historical path. This address also repeats the problem framing found in the campaign discourse, but at the broader civilizational scale. Here, strong statehood becomes rationalized as a practical necessity for survival. This is rationalization because sovereignty and state capacity are presented as necessary means to protect development, welfare, and independence. At the same time, Putin uses mythopoesis by placing contemporary politics within a narrative of Russia's historical collapses. His historical narrative turns the restored presidency into a safeguard against disintegration. The legitimate path is unity, patriotism, sovereignty, and national responsibility, and the illegitimate path, on the other hand, is fragmentation, moral decline, and collapse. Thus, the inauguration and the December 2012 address do not mark a separate discursive turn. They show how the re-legitimation strategy first developed in the campaign articles was translated into the language of restored presidential authority, constitutional order, and national-historical continuity.

The political order configuration also becomes clearer after the inauguration. Putin continues to use the language of democracy, rights, and civic participation, but these concepts are redefined within a state-centered framework. Citizens are encouraged to take part in public life, but their participation is presented as a contribution to national unity, prosperity, and state development, rather than as a challenge to presidential authority In the December 2012 address, civic responsibility and patriotism are described as the consolidating basis of politics. This

again combines authorization and moral evaluation: participation is linked to constitutional principles, but it is morally legitimate when it strengthens the Fatherland, social solidarity, and national unity.

In sum, Putin's discourse after the 2011-2012 protests re-legitimated his return after the tandemocracy through a strategy of translation. Protest is translated into the problem of revolutionary rupture, irresponsible elite politics, weak state capacity. Dissatisfaction is translated into the need for institutionalized feedback and managed participation. Modernization is translated into development under the protection of a strong sovereign state. Russia itself is translated into a historical and moral community whose survival depends on unity, state capacity, and protection from internal and external fragmentation. Through these moves, Putin's discourse deprives protest of autonomous political subjectivity by reabsorbing it into a broader narrative of order, sovereignty, and national survival.

4.2 Case Study 2: Kazakhstan

4.2.1 Tokayev's Legitimation Discourse under the Tutelary Regime, 2019-2021

Before the January events in 2022, Tokayev's discourse is understood as a gradual repositioning of presidential authority inside a tutelary regime, rather than as a simple accumulation of independent power. Across the five speeches examined here − the parliamentary speech of 20 March 2019, the inauguration speech of 12 June 2019, the State of the Nation Address of 2019, 2020, and 2021 − Tokayev did not initially present himself as the founder of a new political order. Rather, he legitimized himself as a President who would preserve the inherited order, respond to public demands in a controlled way, and gradually expand his own authority from within the system Nazarbayev made.

At the level of problem framing, Tokayev's early discourse presents Kazakhstan's main political task as preserving stability, continuity, and institutional coherence during a sensitive transfer of power. In the parliamentary speech of 20 March 2019, the immediate task is the orderly continuation of statehood after Nazarbayev's resignation. This is mainly a form of rationalization. Continuity is justified as necessary for preventing uncertainty and preserving the functioning of the state. In the inauguration speech of 12 June 2019, this problem becomes

more procedural, as Tokayev presents the election as proof of orderly succession and public support, which adds authorization through electoral procedure to the inherited authority of Nazarbayev. By September 2019, however, the problem is reformulated more clearly as one of responsiveness, public trust, and the need to improve communication between the state and society. This is where the discourse of the "Listening State" becomes central. Tokayev presents the problem not as the absence of state authority, but as the need to make state authority more attentive, more effective, and better able to channel social demands without allowing politics to move into uncontrolled contestation. In Van Leeuwen's terms, this is mainly rationalization. The concept "Listening State" is justified as an instrument for solving problems, managing feedback, and improving governance. It is also supported by moral evaluation, because listening, openness, and responsiveness are presented as positive values of good government. By the 2020 address, under the pressure of the pandemic, this discourse became more administrative and corrective. Tokayev continued to speak in the language of the "Listening State," but the emphasis shifted toward state capacity, planning, implementation, and the need to reorganize the state apparatus under stronger presidential supervision. By the 2021 address, the main problem is represented even more concretely as inefficiency, bureaucratic weakness, and poor implementation. The lower levels of the state are shown as underperforming, and the presidency is increasingly positioned as the place from which these failures can be identified and corrected.

At the level of legacy framing, Tokayev's discourse in 2019 remains deeply embedded in Nazarbayev's legacy. The parliamentary speech of 20 March 2019 is especially important in this regard. Tokayev constructs the transfer of power not as the beginning of a new order, but as the continuation of a rightful one already created by Nazarbayev as the First President. The foundations of independent Kazakhstan-state institutions, constitutional order, diplomacy, foreign investment, social harmony, Astana, *Mangilik El* (Eternal Nation), and *Ruhani Zhangyru* (Modernization of Kazakhstan's Identity) are all tied to Nazarbayev's leadership. This is a clear form of authorization by personal authority. Tokayev's position is legitimized through the authority of Nazarbayev as founder, predecessor, and national leader. This legacy framing also contains rationalization and mythopoesis. It is rationalizing because Nazarbayev's rule is justified through concrete achievements, such as state-building, economic

modernization, and international recognition. It is mythopoetic because independent Kazakhstan is narrated as a successful historical journey from post-Soviet uncertainty to sovereign statehood. Tokayev himself appears primarily as a loyal associate and trusted successor rather than as an independent political subject. Performance-based and ideological claims reinforce this continuity-based logic, since Nazarbayev's rule is presented as both successful and historically meaningful. The inauguration speech of 12 June 2019 adds a procedural and electoral layer to this framework, but it does not fundamentally loosen Tokayev's dependence on the inherited order. Tokayev thanks citizens for supporting him and describes the election as a "fair and open competition," yet he immediately links this support to the continuation of the strategic course of the First President. Read against the OSCE/ODIHR final report, which concluded that the election was marked by violations of fundamental freedoms, restrictions on genuine political pluralism, significant irregularities, and widespread detentions of peaceful protesters, Tokayev's claims appear less as neutral descriptions than as efforts to stabilize contested procedural legitimacy (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). In this sense, Tokayev is still positioned as an elected custodian of continuity. The September 2019 address begins to shift this balance. Legacy remains important, but it is increasingly combined with reform language, institutional adjustment, and future-oriented responsiveness. By the 2021 address, continuity with Nazarbayev has not disappeared, but it is less central than before. The past remains a supporting frame, while Tokayev's own governing role moves closer to the center of the discourse.

At the level of leadership claim, Tokayev's discourse moves from delegated authority to a stronger image of supervisory leadership. In March 2019, his agency is still limited and highly respectful toward the predecessor. He appears mainly as the person entrusted to preserve what Nazarbayev built. This is primarily authorization through the predecessor's personal authority. In June 2019, this image becomes more layered, because Tokayev now adds electoral validation to his authority. However, as previously noted, since the election did not authentically reflect the public will, it can be argued that it relied primarily on Nazarbayev's authority and the systemic framework he established (OSCE/ODIHR, 2019). A more substantial shift takes place in the State of the Nation Address of 2 September 2019. Here Tokayev presents himself not only as the carrier of continuity, but as the President who will

organize, lead, and supervise reform. This is especially visible in the discourse of the "Listening State." Tokayev speaks of dialogue, openness, oversight, and feedback, but these are framed not as autonomous political agency from below, but as forms of participation that the state can recognize, manage, and institutionalize through channels such as the National Council of Public Trust, parliamentary procedures, and legal regulation. In Van Leeuwen's terms, this is mainly rationalization. Tokayev constructs presidential agency as the authority that listens by defining the terms on which society may speak. The 2020 address developes this image of Tokayev as a President who coordinates reform and corrects the state institutions by placing strategic planning, and reorganizing institutions more directly under presidential control. The 2021 address strengthens this pattern further. Tokayev is now placed more clearly at the center of the political system as the actor who can identify problems, issue instructions, correct failures, and discipline the state apparatus. This is significant because administrative weakness is turned into a reason for stronger presidential authority. The presidency is thus legitimized as the institution that can restore discipline, coherence, and effectiveness to a fragmented governing system. This leadership claim relies mainly on rationalization.

At the level of political order configuration, Tokayev's pre-January 2022 discourse consistently justifies a model of controlled reform. Tokayev argues that political transformation must be implemented "gradually and steadily," because "explosive, unsystematic political liberalization" leads to destabilization and even "loss of statehood." Reform is therefore justified as an instrument for preserving state stability rather than as an independent democratic good. This logic also structures the "Listening State." Listening is framed not as a concession to bottom-up contestation, but as the proper administrative solution to social demands within a political order built on a "strong President – an influential Parliament – an accountable Government." This discourse is rationalization in Van Leeuwen's terms, because the system is presented as the most effective way to maintain stability, respond to citizens, and implement reforms. In 2021 address, this order is justified even more strongly through performance and correction. Tokayev does not simply claim that the state has delivered results. He presents the presidency itself as the institution that can improve the effectiveness of the existing system. Strong presidential rule is thereby justified as the necessary form of authority for protecting social stability, improving governance, and preserving national cohesion.

Taken together, Tokayev's pre-January 2022 events discourse was characterized not by rupture, but by a gradual reconfiguration of legitimation within the tutelary regime. At the level of problem framing, the discourse moved from continuity after succession to responsiveness and later to bureaucratic inefficiency. At the level of legacy framing, Tokayev remained strongly tied to Nazarbayev's legacy in 2019, but this dependence gradually weakened as his own governing role became more visible. At the level of leadership claim, he moved from loyal successor to elected successor, then to organizer of controlled responsiveness, and finally to corrector of the state apparatus. At the level of order justification, the discourse consistently defended a model of controlled reform, bounded participation, and a strong presidency. Van Leeuwen's framework makes this gradual shift clearer. Authorization first came from Nazarbayev's personal and historical authority, then from elections, constitutional institutions, and the presidential office. Rationalization became increasingly important as Tokayev justified reform, state planning, public dialogue, and administrative correction. In this sense, the period from 2019 to 2021 did not yet produce a fully redefined political order, but it did establish the main discursive foundations through which Tokayev would later re-legitimate his presidency after Bloody January.

4.2.2 Tokayev's Re-legitimation Discourse after January 2022

This section analyses six key speeches delivered by Tokayev after the January 2022 unrest – the address to the people of Kazakhstan of 7 January 2022, the speech at the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan session of 11 January 2022, the State of the Nation Address of 16 March 2022, the Address to the people of Kazakhstan after referendum of 6 June 2022, the State of the Nation Address of 1 September 2022, and the inauguration speech of 26 November 2022. Overall, Tokayev's post-January discourse can be read as a gradual reinterpretation of the crisis. The January events are first framed as terrorism and violent disorder, then as evidence of injustice and institutional dysfunction, and finally as the justification for constitutional reform, political renewal, and a new presidential mandate.

At the level of problem framing, Tokayev's first response to the January events in 2022 defines the crisis primarily as a threat to constitutional order and state survival. This can

be seen clearly in his speech of 7 January 2022. The central vocabulary of the speech is built around terms such as “terrorists,” “bandits,” and “anti-terrorist operation,” which moves the unrest away from the language of social protest and into the language of emergency security. He dismisses foreign calls for negotiations as nonsense, thereby presenting a hardline response as the only appropriate response to terrorism, thereby framing coercive state action as both necessary and lawful.

There are some calls abroad for the parties to hold talks to resolve problems peacefully. This is nonsense! What kind of negotiations can take place with criminals and murderers? We have had to deal with armed and trained bandits, both local and foreign. They must be eliminated, and this will be done soon. Law enforcement forces are morally and technically ready to perform this task (Tokayev, 2022, January 7).

This is a clear case of authorization and rationalization. Coercive action is justified through the Constitution and presented as the only practical response to terrorism. The first stage constructs the political problem as violent anti-state disorder and positions presidential action as the condition for restoring normal politics.

The meaning of the January events begins to expand in the 11 January speech, where Tokayev still uses the language of security but also starts to connect the crisis to domestic injustice, inequality, and structural failure. This broader framing is important because it was not only rhetorical. After the January events, Tokayev also moved against key figures and symbols associated with the Nazarbayev-era power structure, including the removal of Nazarbayev’s special constitutional status and the renaming of Nur-Sultan back to Astana (Abishev et al., 2024; Caron, 2023). The unrest is therefore represented not only as an attack by terrorists or criminals, but also as a warning that the existing political and economic model had produced serious social distortions. This move allows Tokayev to shift from the role of emergency defender to the role of corrective President who restores order and draws political lessons from the crisis. A similar interpretation appears in later elite discourse, where Ashimbayev, the Chairperson of the Senate, presents January as the result of injustice, double standards, and social inequality, while linking later reforms to the need to prevent similar events in the future (Baitasov, 2022). In this way, the problem representation gradually broadens from terrorism and disorder to injustice, monopolization, and the failure of the

inherited system to respond to society, while the accompanying personnel and symbolic changes show that this reinterpretation was tied to real reorganization of the post-Nazarbayev order.

At the level of legacy framing, the March 2022 address is the key turning point. Tokayev repositions the Nazarbayev-era order as both historically significant and institutionally exhausted. He argues that the system based on the "over-concentration of power had already lost its effectiveness," and could no longer consolidate a changing society, and that Kazakhstan has to transition from a super-presidential form of government to a "presidential republic with a strong Parliament." He further links the January events to the monopolization of political and economic activity, the excessive influence of people close to the highest official, and oligarchic groups that treated the state as a "personal fiefdom." This does not erase Nazarbayev's achievements from the official narrative, but it changes how the predecessor's legacy is positioned in relation to the future. This discourse is both rationalization and moral evaluation in Van Leeuwen's terms. Rationalization appears because the old model can no longer consolidate a changing society and reform is necessary. Moral evaluation appears since monopoly, nepotism, oligarchic privilege, and treating the state as private property are coded as morally unacceptable. In this sense, January becomes the moment through which Tokayev can distance his presidency from the inherited system without rejecting the entire post-independence state-building narrative.

This temporal repositioning is closely connected to the language of "New Kazakhstan" (*Zhana Kazakhstan*). In the March 2022 address, "New Kazakhstan," functions as a language of renewal and political reset after January, linking constitutional reform to a broader project of an effective state, stronger civil society, fairer competition, and a renewed political order. The symbolic reversal of the capital's name is especially useful here as contextual evidence, because it shows how the discourse of renewal was accompanied by visible moves to reduce the public centrality of Nazarbayev's personal legacy (Caron, 2023). Later official discourse gives this language a clearer ideological form through the idea of "New and Fair Kazakhstan" (*Zhana, Adiletti Kazakhstan*) especially in the writings of Erlan Karin, Kazakhstan's State Counsellor and one of Tokayev's senior officials working under the direct supervision of the President, who describes "Fair Kazakhstan" as the ideological dominant of state policy and

public life after January, describing it as an effective state with a strong civil society, fair competition, and a renewed political order (Karin, 2024). Karin also presents the "Listening State," "Law and Order," and the formula of a "strong President - an influential Parliament - an accountable Government" as interconnected elements of this broader course, which shows how post-January reform was framed as a coherent political project rather than a set of isolated measures (Karin, 2024). In this sense, Tokayev's discourse takes on moral evaluation of its own. The legacy of the previous order is therefore reinterpreted through a temporal contrast between a monopolized past and a future-oriented project of renewal under Tokayev's leadership. The importance of these supplementary materials is that they show that "New Kazakhstan" was not only a slogan in presidential speeches, but also a framework through which personnel changes and institutional reforms could be made intelligible as parts of one post-unrest political reset.

At the level of leadership claim, Tokayev first presents himself as the defender of constitutional order and then as the reformer who can correct the failures revealed by January. In the 7 January address, his agency is constructed through emergency command. He gives orders to the army and law enforcement agencies, invokes the Constitution, justifies the CSTO[9] appeal, and assumes responsibility for restoring order. This is primarily authorization through office, law, and emergency powers. In the 11 January 2022 and March 2022 speeches, this emergency agency develops into corrective presidential authority, because Tokayev begins to explain what went wrong inside the state and why institutional reform is necessary. The broader post-January political context strengthens this reading, because Tokayev's discourse of correction was accompanied by concrete moves that shifted control away from Nazarbayev-linked networks and placed the presidency more clearly at the center of institutional reorganization (Abishev et al., 2024). He presents himself as the President who can identify the failures of the previous model, limit excessive concentration of power, reduce monopolization, and reorganize the political system. This leadership claim is especially visible in the March 2022 speech, where he proposes a transition from a super-presidential form of government to a presidential republic with a strong Parliament. Yet this reform does not remove

[9] The Collective Security Treaty Organization

the presidency from the center of the new order, since Tokayev retains the formula of a "strong President - an influential Parliament - an accountable Government" as the basis of political redesign. In this sense, the personnel and symbolic changes after January do not simply confirm a democratic opening; they support Tokayev's claim to be the central actor who can separate the new presidency from the old tutelary system while keeping political change under presidential direction.

The later speeches of June, September, and November in 2022 then stabilize this presidential mandate through constitutional and electoral language. In Van Leeuwen's terms, this stage relies especially on authorization, because Tokayev grounds the renewed mandate in referendum, constitutional reform, electoral procedure, and the presidential oath. In the June 2022 speech, the referendum is presented as a national endorsement of reform and as the beginning of a new political stage. This procedural authorization is supported by rationalization, since constitutional reform is presented as the necessary means for creating a more effective, balanced, and fair political order. In the September 2022 address, Tokayev explains the reset of the electoral cycle, the one-term presidency, and further institutional changes as necessary for political renewal and long-term stability. Here, rationalization becomes especially visible. Institutional redesign is justified as a practical response to the failures revealed by the January events and a way to secure long-term stability. In the 26 November 2022 inauguration speech, Tokayev presents the people's trust as an *amanat*, that is, as a morally binding trust or covenant that he is obliged to fulfil, and this shifts presidential authority from being merely legally granted to being ethically and nationally grounded. This is moral evaluation supported by the authority of tradition. The electoral mandate is reinterpreted through the culturally resonant concept of *amanat*,- the covenant - turning political support into a "sacred duty." This move becomes even more significant when read against the wider political vocabulary of 2022, because the official factsheet on the renaming of the Party from Nur Otan to AMANAT explained the word as "the legacy of ancestors, a message to future generations," which means that Tokayev's later use of *amanat* connects electoral trust to a broader discourse of historical inheritance and moral duty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). In Van Leeuwen's framework, this also gives the mandate a mythopoetic dimension, because Tokayev's leadership is placed within a story of inherited duty and future generations. A key

discursive effect of this rhetoric is that a politically constrained electoral process is recast as a morally charged "mandate of trust," allowing Tokayev to appear not only as the legally elected President but also as the leader entrusted with a national duty.

At the level of political order configuration, Tokayev's discourse legitimizes a post-January events order that combines security, constitutional reform, controlled participation, and justice. In Van Leeuwen's terms, this configuration moves across authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis. In the immediate aftermath of January, the justified order is one of constitutional security, where coercive action is presented as necessary to protect citizens, restore legality, and prevent permissiveness and anarchy. By March 2022, on the other hand, the unrest is redefined as institutional correction, where the failures of the previous super-presidential model become the reason for constitutional reform and the redistribution of some powers. Here, rationalization becomes central, but at the same time, the warning that excessive concentration of power can produce instability gives this discourse a mythopoetic dimension. The January events become a cautionary story about the dangers of monopolized power. In the speeches in June and September, Tokayev's order is stabilized through referendum, constitutional amendments, the reset of the electoral cycle, and the one-term presidency, all of which are presented as evidence of a new political course. By the November 2022 address, the order is given a stronger moral foundation through trust, justice, national responsibility, and *amanat* – the covenant. However, OSCE/ODIHR described the 2022 referendum as taking place in an environment "short of genuine political pluralism," and it described the November presidential election as unfolding in a political environment lacking competitiveness (OSCE/ODIHR, 2022; 2023). It also noted that, although some presidential powers had been limited, the head of state still retained significant control over the electoral process (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023). Considering these assessments, the reforms are presented as a break from monopolized power and as a step toward a fairer state, but they also preserve the presidency as the central institution that defines the pace, direction, and limits of political change.

In sum, Tokayev's post-January discourse progressively reinterprets the meaning of the January 2022 events and uses that reinterpretation to rebuild presidential authority. In the earliest speeches, January is framed mainly as terrorism, violent disorder, and a threat to

constitutional order. It is then described as evidence of injustice, monopolization, and the exhaustion of the inherited political model. Later, it becomes the main justification for constitutional reform, institutional reset, electoral renewal, and the ideological project of "New Kazakhstan" and "Fair Kazakhstan." These discursive shifts were reinforced by political and symbolic acts that weakened Nazarbayev's post-presidential position, changed the composition of power around Tokayev, and visibly marked the transition away from the old tutelary system. Before January, Tokayev's authority still depended on continuity with Nazarbayev and on the controlled responsiveness of the "Listening State." After January, however, he increasingly presented himself as the President who had contained the crisis, identified the failures that produced it, and drawn the necessary institutional lessons from it. The result was a discourse in which order, justice, reform, and national unity were reorganized around a presidency that was not weakened by the January events, but re-described and re-centered within a new post-crisis framework of rule.

5 Discussion

The previous chapter analyzed the Russia and Kazakhstan cases separately. In the Russia's case, the analysis showed how Medvedev's pre-protest discourse legitimized presidential authority through modernization and controlled reform, and how Putin's post-protest discourse shifted toward sovereignty, continuity, and order. In the Kazakhstan's case, the analysis showed how Tokayev's pre-January 2022 discourse first depended on Nazarbayev' s legacy and the idea of controlled responsiveness, and how his post-January 2022 discourse reinterpreted the unrest as a reason for order, reform, justice, and the construction of a new political phase.

In this chapter, these findings are compared in order to answer the research questions of this thesis. By comparing the two cases through these codes, the chapter examines how protest and unrest were interpreted, how the predecessor's legacy was positioned, how leaders constructed their own mandate, and what kind of political order was made to appear necessary after the destabilization of shared-power structures. The main argument of this chapter is that

Russia and Kazakhstan followed different paths of re-legitimation, but both cases turned crisis into a justification for renewed presidential centrality.

The analysis shows that Russia and Kazakhstan followed different discursive paths, but both cases transformed moments of protest or unrest into arguments for a renewed presidential center. In Kazakhstan, Tokayev's re-legitimation relied more strongly on crisis correction, selective rupture from the Nazarbayev-era order, constitutional reform, justice, and the language of "New Kazakhstan." The comparison is important because both cases involved leaders who were connected to the previous order.

The first point of comparison concerns how each case framed protest as a political problem. In both cases, public contestation was not treated mainly as autonomous democratic agency from below. In both Russia and Kazakhstan, protest was recontextualized inside a state-centered framework. Political leaders defined which forms of participation were legitimate, which forms were threats or unlawful, and why renewed presidential authority was necessary. In Van Leeuwen's terms, both cases used authorization to define legitimate action through law, constitutional order, and state institutions, and moral evaluation to separate responsible citizens from dangerous actors.

The difference lies in how they were discursively used. In Russia, the 2011–12 protests were politically significant, and reporting described the December 2011 demonstrations as among the largest protests against the regime or among the biggest demonstrations since the Soviet collapse (Reuters, 2011; Elder, 2011). However, the protests did not become the central founding event of Putin's renewed presidency. Instead, they were translated into a broader problem of governable participation, state capacity, sovereignty, and the prevention of revolutionary disorder. Medvedev's discourse partially recognized lawful civil activity as democratic maturation, while Putin's later discourse widened the issue into a question of how Russia could avoid collapse, oligarchy, foreign interference, and a return to the weakness of the 1990s. Thus, the Russia's case was not allowed to remain a claim of democratic contestation in its own right. Instead, it was folded into a broader narrative of order, sovereignty, and political continuity.

Kazakhstan followed a different path. The January 2022 events remained much more visible in Tokayev's discourse throughout the year. At first, this protest was securitized far

more strongly than in the Russia's case. Tokayev described the unrest through terms such as "terrorists," "bandits," "armed criminals," and "anti-terrorist operation," moving it away from the language of social protest and into the language of emergency security and anti-state-violence. This difference was also connected to the different character of the two episodes. Whereas the protest wave in Russia was largely centered on electoral fraud, fair elections, and peaceful civil mobilization, the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan involved violent unrest, deaths, attacks on state institutions, security-sector fragmentation, and the deployment of CSTO forces (Central Communications Service under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022; Proroković, 2023). This made it easier for Tokayev to present January 2022 not only as public dissatisfaction, but as a threat to constitutional order and state survival. Later, however, it was reinterpreted as evidence of deeper systemic failure, such as monopolization, oligarchic privilege, over-concentration of power, inequality, and exhaustion of the previous political-economic system. Unlike Russia, where protest was gradually displaced into a broader narrative of sovereign order, Kazakhstan turned the January 2022 events into the main discursive foundation for reform, renewal, and distancing from the Nazarbayev-era order. Therefore, the two cases share a state-centered logic of problem framing but differ in the role assigned to unrest. In Russia, protest was contained by being redefined through the language of order, sovereignty, and state capacity, and continuity itself became the solution. In Kazakhstan, the January 2022 events were first securitized and then transformed into a justification for corrective renewal. The comparison shows that both leaders used crisis to re-center presidential authority, but through different discursive moves. Russia minimized the autonomous political meaning of protest by folding it into a broader narrative of sovereign order and continuity. Kazakhstan, by contrast, made January the central reference point for explaining why reform, renewal, and a stronger Tokayev presidency were necessary.

The second major comparison concerns legacy framing. Both cases show that leaders used the past to justify the present, but they did so in different ways according to each leader's relationship to the inherited order. In Van Leeuwen's framework, Russia relied more strongly on mythopoesis and rationalization, while Kazakhstan moved from authorization through the predecessor's legacy toward moral evaluation and rationalization of institutional correction.

In Russia, the main contrast was drawn between the chaos of the 1990s and the recovery of the 2000s. Because Putin was the central political figure of the post-2000 order, he could not distance himself from the immediate past without weakening the very narrative that legitimized his return. As a result, the Medvedev period is folded into a longer story of restoration, stabilization, and state capacity. Russia's legacy framing can therefore be understood as restorative continuity. This is mythopoetic because the past is organized as a warning story. The 1990s represent collapse, weakness, oligarchy, and loss of control, while the 2000s represent recovery. The 1990s functioned as the negative past that must not return, while the 2000s and the tandem period were incorporated into a continuous route of national recovery.

Kazakhstan followed a different logic. Tokayev was also an insider in Nazarbayev's regime, but the previous order derived its legitimacy primarily from Nazarbayev's personal authority and state-building legacy, not from Tokayev himself (Akorda, n.d.). In the early Tokayev period, his authority was still closely tied to Nazarbayev's state-building legacy and to the promise of continuity. This early framing relied strongly on authorization by Nazarbayev's status as founder, predecessor, and symbol of Kazakhstan's state-building success. Yet this dependence gradually weakened before January 2022, as Tokayev began to foreground his own governing role through the language of the "Listening State." After the January 2022 events, this relationship to the past was reworked. Tokayev did not reject Nazarbayev's historical role completely, but he increasingly separated the preservation of statehood from the institutional distortions of the Nazarbayev's period. Over-concentration of power, monopolization, inequality, and weak accountability were recoded as problems that required correction. Here legacy framing shifted toward moral evaluation and rationalization. Kazakhstan's legacy framing can therefore be described as selective rupture. The past was not denied, but divided into achievements to be preserved and systemic failures to be overcome.

The difference shows that legacy framing was shaped less by the events themselves than by the leader's position within the inherited order. Putin had to protect the post-2000 continuity narrative because it was the foundation of his own authority. Tokayev, by contrast, could gradually transform his inherited legitimacy into corrective legitimacy by presenting himself as the successor capable of preserving the state while reforming the model built by his

predecessor. This is why Russia's discourse made continuity appear necessary, whereas Kazakhstan's discourse made reform appear necessary for the survival of the state. In Russia, the past legitimized the return of the same leader, who restored the country from 1990s chaos. In Kazakhstan, the past legitimized the repositioning of the successor. The symbolic and institutional changes after the January 2022 events, including the reduction of Nazarbayev's post-presidential role and the renaming of the capital, reinforced this discursive shift by turning "New Kazakhstan" into a project of controlled distancing.

The third point of comparison is leadership claim. In both cases, crisis discourse recentered presidential authority by presenting the leader as the actor capable of hearing society, defining acceptable reform, and protecting state order. However, the structure of this claim differed. In Russia, leadership was divided between Medvedev's formal presidency and Putin's claim to renewed presidential authority. Putin's leadership claim was restorative and protective: he was the returning guardian who could preserve the order that had been built since the 2000s. Tokayev's leadership claim was corrective: he was the successor who had contained the crisis and now had to repair the system that produced it.

The fourth point concerns the type of political order that each discourse made appear necessary after protest. In both cases, each discourse justified a renewed presidential center that claimed to manage reform, participation, and stability, but through different vocabularies. Russia justified a protective order: presidential centrality was necessary to keep participation lawful, preserve sovereignty, and defend historical continuity. Kazakhstan justified a corrective order: presidential centrality was necessary to restore security, reorganize institutions, and build a fairer state. In both cases, protest and unrest did not become arguments for limiting presidential authority. They became arguments for why presidential authority had to remain central to the political order.

The comparison provides three main findings. First, in both cases, crisis was contextualized. Russia contextualized election protest as a problem of disorder, manipulation, and governable participation. Kazakhstan contextualized January from terrorism and anti-state violence into evidence of injustice, monopolization, and the exhaustion of the previous model. In both cases, destabilizing events were transformed into reasons for stronger presidential interpretation and control. Second, the predecessor's legacy was central, but it worked

differently in each case. Russia used the past to preserve continuity. The negative memory of the 1990s and the positive memory of post-2000 restoration allowed Putin to present his return as a continuation of national recovery. Kazakhstan used the past to create selective rupture. Nazarbayev's state-building legacy remained part of official history, but the institutional logic of the Nazarbayev-era order was recoded as over-concentrated, monopolized, and outdated after January. Third, both leaders used crisis to make their own leadership appear necessary. Putin's discourse placed political authority around a continued presidential system capable of preserving sovereignty, unity, and Russia's historical identity. Tokayev's discourse placed political authority around a corrective presidency capable of restoring order, learning from January, reforming institutions, and fulfilling a morally charged national trust. This means that re-legitimation did not simply repair damaged legitimacy. It also redefined what the leader was for.

A further discussion point concerns the international dimension of Putin's re-legitimation discourse. This point is not the central object of this thesis, which focuses mainly on the construction of presidential authority, but it opens an important direction for interpreting the broader implications of the Russia's case. The beginning of Putin's third presidency did not pre-determine the 2014 annexation of Crimea, but it already contained a discursive portfolio that later became central in the Crimea context. In the 2014 Crimea speech, Crimea was presented as historically and emotionally inseparable from Russia, while the West was accused of crossing a line over Ukraine (Putin, 2014, March 18). Historical belonging, Russian-speaking populations, Western interference, and sovereign protection were therefore brought together to justify the action.

The elements of this structure were already visible in Putin's 2012 campaign discourse. In "Russia and the Changing World" (*Rossiia i meniaiushchiisia mir*) (Putin, 2012, February 27), Libya and the Arab Spring were described as cautionary examples of what happens when external intervention destroys state sovereignty. This framing marked a clear shift from Medvedev's foreign policy discourse. Under Medvedev, the Libya crisis was interpreted as a result of authoritarianism, corruption, and mismanagement. It was also treated as an opportunity to develop a more cooperative platform with Western institutions. Under Putin, however, Libya was reinterpreted as a cautionary example of Western intervention, regime

change, and the erosion of state sovereignty (Makarychev, 2011; 2012). The issue of Baltic non-citizens and Russian-speaking communities abroad was especially important in this regard, because it allowed Putin to portray Russia as a defender of communities left outside the Russian state after the Soviet collapse.

At this point, the connection between domestic re-legitimation and later legitimation about Crimea should be stated cautiously. The object of legitimation in this thesis is Putin's presidential authority, whereas the object of legitimation in the 2014 Crimea speech was Russia's action in Ukraine and the incorporation of Crimea. The connection is therefore that they created a portfolio that could serve both purposes. Domestically, Putin's 2012 discourse placed protest and dissatisfaction within a broader story about Russia's recurring political problems, such as elite irresponsibility, revolutionary rupture, and the need for governable participation. Internationally, a similar set of assumptions appeared in Putin's treatment of Libya, Arab Spring, NATO expansion, and Russian-speaking communities abroad, where external intervention, regime change, and Western selectivity were presented as threats to sovereignty and state stability. This is why the 2012 discourse matters for understanding the later Crimea speech. It had already linked sovereign defense, historical belonging, Western interference, and the protection of Russian-speaking communities into a usable language of justification. Applying this argument to Van Leeuwen's framework, Libya and Arab Spring worked as mythopoesis, because they were turned into warning narratives about what happens when sovereignty is violated. The strong sovereign state was then rationalized as the necessary condition for protecting Russia from both domestic destabilization and international intervention.

The inauguration speech and the 2012 Address to the Federal Assembly further stabilized this portrait after Putin's return to the presidency. The December 2012 Address insisted that Russia "must be and remain Russia," a sovereign country with its own national and spiritual identity. Thus, the external world was no longer mainly a space of modernization or technocratic cooperation, as in Medvedev's discourse, but a space in which Russia had to prove that it could remain itself under conditions of geopolitical pressure. In this sense, the early third-term discourse already linked domestic order and sovereignty against external interference within a single logic of presidential re-legitimation.

Kazakhstan is not directly part of Ukraine-related discourse, but it offers a contrast in how the international dimension entered post-unrest re-legitimation. In January 2022, Tokayev's appeal to the CSTO gave external backing to his emergency framing of the January events as a threat to constitutional order and state security. The CSTO intervention helped stabilize the coercive balance in Tokayev's favor and signaled to domestic elites and security institutions that he remained the internationally recognized center of authority (von Essen & Hedenskog, 2022). However, this external support was politically ambiguous, because it also risked making Kazakhstan's post-January stabilization appear dependent on a Russia-led security framework (von Essen & Hedenskog, 2022). This ambiguity became more sensitive after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine only weeks later, because the same Russia-led security environment now appeared connected to the violation of another post-Soviet state's sovereignty (von Essen & Hedenskog, 2022). However, Tokayev's later discourse moved in a different direction from Putin's. Where Putin reframed domestic contestation through a wider narrative of internal weakness, elite irresponsibility, revolutionary rupture, and possible external interference, Tokayev gradually re-domesticated the January crisis through "Tragic January," constitutional reform, justice, and "New Kazakhstan." In short, Putin turned the international sphere into a resource for legitimating historical continuity, while Tokayev used external security support only temporarily before shifting legitimacy back toward domestic reform and justice. This point goes beyond the central focus of this thesis, but it opens a possible direction for future research. This analysis cannot fully conclude why this shift occurred. Future research could examine whether this change was driven primarily by the domestic struggle to separate Tokayev's authority from the Nazarbayev-era order, by the political sensitivity of Russia-led security dependence after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or by other factors.

6 Conclusion

This thesis examined how presidential authority was discursively re-legitimated after the destabilization of shared-power structures in authoritarian regimes. Chapter 1 introduced the research problem by situating Russia and Kazakhstan within the broader puzzle of

authoritarian resilience in the post-Soviet space. It identified the main research gap: while existing studies explain authoritarian resilience through institutions, repression, co-optation, and performance (Gerschewski, 2013; von Soest & Grauvogel, 2017), they say less about how authority is discursively repaired after moments of protest, unrest, and elite instability. The chapter therefore formulated the research questions and justified the comparison of Russia after 2011-12 protests and Kazakhstan after January 2022 as two cases in which shared-power structures became destabilized and presidential authority had to be re-legitimated.

Chapter 2 developed the theoretical framework by defining legitimacy, legitimation, re-legitimation, shared-power structures, and presidential authority. It argued that shared-power structures create a specific vulnerability because authority, responsibility, and legitimacy may become divided between a predecessor and a successor (Bünte, 2022; Hale & Colton, 2010; Abishev et al., 2024). This chapter therefore established the central expectation of the thesis: when such arrangements become destabilized, leaders must not only respond to protest or unrest, but also reconstruct the meaning of presidential authority itself.

Chapter 3 explained the research design, data collection, and limitations of the study. The analysis used Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how presidential narratives construct political meaning and legitimation claims. The chapter also introduced the four analytical codes used in the empirical analysis: problem framing, legacy framing, leadership claim, and political order configuration. These codes were used to trace how crisis was defined, how the past was interpreted, how presidential agency was authorized, and what kind of political order was made to appear necessary. Van Leeuwen's categories of legitimation were then used to clarify how these claims were justified through authorization, rationalization, moral evaluation, and mythopoesis.

Chapter 4 then examined the Russia and Kazakhstan cases separately. In the Russian case, it showed how the 2011-12 protests were reinterpreted into a discourse of lawful participation, state strength, and historical continuity. Putin's return was presented not as a personal comeback, but as the restoration and protection of an order built since the 2000s. In the Kazakhstan's case, the analysis showed a different path. The January 2022 events were first framed as a security emergency, but were later reinterpreted as evidence of monopolization in

political and economic activity. This allowed Tokayev to present himself as a corrective President and to justify reform without fully rejecting the state-building legacy of Nazarbayev.

Chapter 5 compared the two cases and showed how different forms of re-legitimation emerged from similar structural tensions. Russia's discourse relied on continuity, protective leadership, sovereignty, and a state-centered order of managed participation. Kazakhstan's discourse relied on selective rupture from the predecessor's order, corrective leadership, constitutional reform, and a state-led project of justice and renewal. The comparison demonstrated that in both cases protest and unrest provided the discursive ground through which presidential authority could be reconstructed as necessary for overcoming crisis.

The first research question asked how presidential authority is discursively re-legitimated after the destabilization of shared-power structures in authoritarian regimes. The main finding is that both Russia and Kazakhstan transformed crisis into a reason for renewed presidential centrality. In Russia, re-legitimation took the form of continuity. Medvedev's 2011 address still spoke in the language of modernization and reform, but it tied political change more closely to legality, order, and controlled institutional reform. Putin's later discourse shifted the center of legitimation toward sovereignty, state strength, national unity, and Russia as a historical and moral community. The result was a discourse in which Putin's return appeared as the continuation of Russia's recovery after the weakness of the 1990s and as the protection of the achievements of the 2000s.

In Kazakhstan, re-legitimation took the form of corrective renewal. Before January 2022, Tokayev's authority was strongly linked to Nazarbayev's legacy, especially in the March 2019 parliamentary speech and the June 2019 inauguration speech. After January 2022, Tokayev first framed the unrest as terrorism and anti-state violence, then gradually reinterpreted it as evidence of injustice, monopolization, and the exhaustion of the previous political model. This allowed him to present his presidency as the actor that could restore order, correct the failures of the old system, and lead Kazakhstan toward "New Fair Kazakhstan." The new political order was therefore justified through reform, justice, constitutional renewal, and a reformed but still central presidency.

The second research question asked how these discourses reinterpreted the legacy of the previous regime in order to articulate a new political order. The comparison shows that

legacy was central in both cases, but it was used differently. In Russia, the 1990s were repeatedly presented as a negative past of disorder, humiliation, and weak statehood, while the 2000s were presented as a period of recovery, stability, and restored sovereignty. In this way, Putin's discourse reduced the political character of the Medvedev period and placed it inside a broader story of national recovery.

In Kazakhstan, the legacy of the predecessor was reorganized more visibly. Nazarbayev's role as state founder was not completely rejected, but the institutional logic of the Nazarbayev-era order was increasingly associated with over-concentration of power, monopolization, oligarchic influence, and social injustice. Tokayev's discourse therefore preserved parts of the state-building narrative while turning the previous model into a problem that required correction.

The broader contribution of this thesis is that it shows re-legitimation as a discursive process of repair. Leaders do not only respond to crisis through repression or institutional change. They also reinterpret what the crisis means, reorganize the meaning of the past, define their own mandate, and present a new political order as necessary. In this sense, the thesis contributes to the study of authoritarian legitimation by showing the plurality and flexibility of legitimating repertoires in authoritarian regimes. Authoritarian legitimation is not a single claim to stability, performance, or legality. It can combine continuity and rupture, legality and emergency, reform and control, national history and future-oriented renewal.

The main conclusion of this thesis is therefore that presidential authority was re-legitimated after the destabilization of shared-power structures through different forms of discursive repair. Russia did this through continuity, restoration, sovereignty, and national identity. In Russia's case, protest was absorbed into a broader discourse of state order and the preservation of continuity. Kazakhstan did this through selective rupture, correction, constitutional reform, and the language of justice. In Kazakhstan's case, January 2022 events were more directly reinterpreted as evidence that the previous political-economic model had produced injustice, monopolization, and institutional exhaustion. These strategies differed in form, but they performed a similar political function: they repaired the narrative of rule and transformed moments of protest and unrest into arguments for renewed presidential centrality.

At the same time, this thesis has focused mainly on how presidential authority was discursively re-legitimated, rather than on why particular discursive strategies were selected or how they were received by society. Future research could examine the reception of these official narratives among citizens, opposition actors, and state elites, as well as the role of elite bargaining and international context in shaping the choice of legitimation strategies.

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8 Appendix 1: Coding Framework

This appendix presents the document coding list used in the empirical analysis. The same four codes are applied across the corpus: problem framing, legacy framing, leadership claim, and political order configuration. The distinction between baseline and protest/post-protest texts indicates a different analytical function. Baseline texts are coded to establish how authority was justified before the destabilization of shared-power structures, while protest and post-protest texts are coded to examine how these earlier patterns were reworked through the interpretation of protest, violence, predecessor legacy, and political order. The purpose of the coding list is to make transparent how the comparative interpretation of presidential discourse was organized.

Table 1. Four Analytical Codes

Code	Definition	Typical indicators
Problem Framing	The way a presidential discourse defines the political problem that requires action or legitimation.	crisis, chaos, terrorism, corruption, backwardness, unfairness, instability, manipulation, reform necessity
Legacy Framing	The way the presidential discourse describes the predecessor, the previous regime, and the past in relation to the present and future.	1990s, first twelve years, First President, Elbasy, New Kazakhstan, restoration, continuity, renewal
Leadership Claim	The way presidential discourse constructs the President as the legitimate central actor capable of responding to the identified problem.	President's duty, national trust, mandate, *amanat*
Political Order Reconfiguration	The way the presidential discourse reorganizes the location, boundaries, and institutional form of political authority after crisis.	strong presidency, controlled reform, managed participation, constitutional order, sovereignty, fair state, law and order, national unity

Table 2: Van Leeuwen's Legitimation Categories Used in the Analysis (Van Leeuwen, 2007)

Legitimation Category	Definition	Indicators
Authorization	Legitimation by authority, such as law, office, constitution, election, referendum, tradition, or an authoritative person.	constitution, law, election, referendum, presidential office
Rationalization	Legitimation by necessity, utility, effectiveness, problem-solving, or means–end logic.	necessary, effective, stability, development, reform, modernization
Moral Evaluation	Legitimation through values that mark certain actions, actors, or orders as good, bad, or dangerous.	justice, fairness, responsibility, patriotism, unity, terrorism, Tragic January
Mythopoesis	Legitimation through narratives, such as historical lessons and warning stories,	1990s collapse, Time of Troubles, national recovery, Tragic January

9 Appendix 2: Comparative Summary and Example of Coding Results

This appendix provides a compact overview of the main coding results. Table 3 summarizes how the four analytical codes appeared differently in the Russian and Kazakhstani cases. Table 4 then provides an example of how the coding framework was applied to Tokayev's post-January 2022 discourse.

Table 3: Summary of Coding Results

Analytical Code	Russia	Kazakhstan

Problem Framing	The 2011–2012 protests were contextualized as threat of revolutionary rupture, elite irresponsibility, weak state capacity, governable participation, and vulnerability to external interference.	The January 2022 events were first framed as terrorism, violent disorder, and a threat to constitutional order. Later, they were reinterpreted as evidence of deeper systemic problems.
Legacy Framing	The 1990s were presented as a period of collapse, weakness, and oligarchic capture, while the 2000s were framed as recovery and restored state capacity.	The Nazarbayev legacy was first treated as the foundation of statehood, stability, and continuity. After January 2022, the institutional logic of the Nazarbayev-era order was associated with monopolization.
Leadership Claim	Putin constructed his authority through his role as guardian of state continuity, sovereignty, and national unity.	Tokayev was first constructed as a loyal successor and later as a corrective reformer who could restore order, address injustice, and reform the previous system.
Political Order Configuration	The justified political order was sovereign, state-centered, and based on legally bounded participation.	The justified political order combined constitutional security, controlled reform, justice, and institutional redesign.

Table 4: Example of Coding (Tokayev's Post-January 2022 events Discourse)

Date	**Type of Text**	**Problem Framing**	**Legacy Framing**	**Leadership Claim**	**Order Justification**

2022.1.7	Presidential address	Terrorism and anti-state violence	Destabilized order	Emergency commander restoring constitutional order	Constitutional security and anti-terrorist order
2022.1.11	Presidential address to parliament	Internal injustice, inequality, and structural failure	Power structure as problematic	Corrective president	Order and social justice
2022.3.16	Presidential address	Previous model presented as ineffective and over-concentrated	Outdated historical stage	Reformer redesigning political system	Strong presidency with stronger parliament
2022.6.6	Presidential address	The referendum as the popular ratification	Break from old model institutionalized	President as reformer with endorsed reform mandate	Constitutional renewal and popular endorsement
2022.9.1	Presidential address	Fair state, political reset, and stability	Post-January order framed as new stage	The actor initiating a new political cycle	Fair State, One Nation, Prosperous Society
2022.11.26	Inauguration	Presidential oath	New stage	*Amanat* (covenant)	Moralized constitutional presidency

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