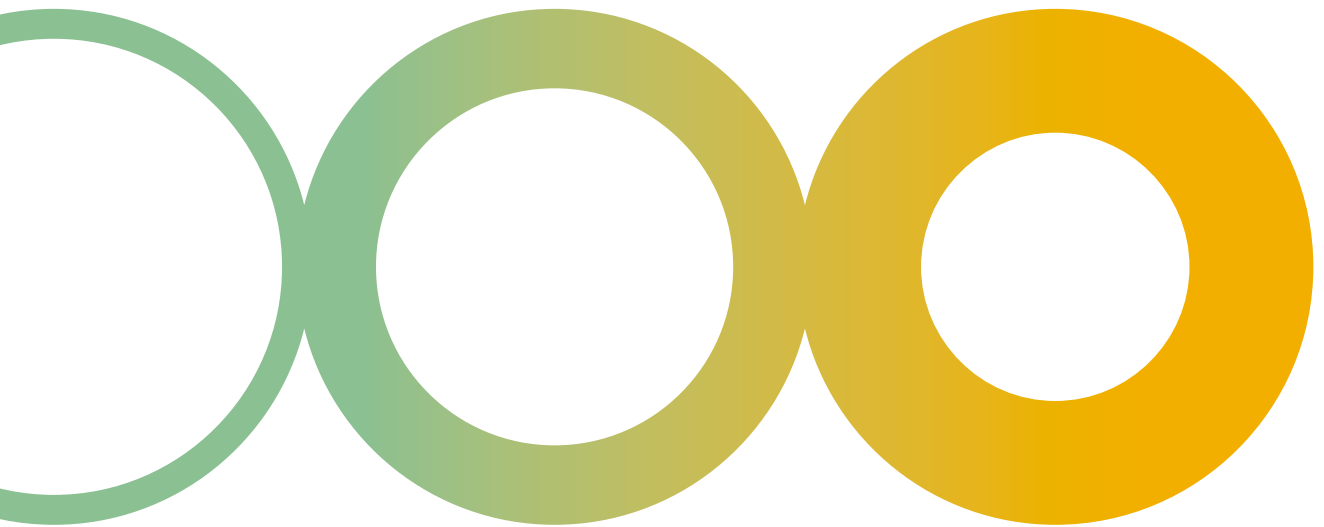


Safeguarding Civic Space



Harnessing Narrative Change

to restore public trust in CSOs

SECTION 1	Introduction	3
SECTION 2	Overview of Shrinking Civic Space	6
SECTION 3	Common Attack Narratives	11
SECTION 4	10 Core Lessons for Narrative Change Practice	16
	Lesson 1	
	Take back the agenda to ‘change the weather’	17
	Lesson 2	
	Map potential openings, not just the attack narratives	20
	Lesson 3	
	The ‘movable middle’ are key to building support for CSOs at scale	23
	Lesson 4	
	Respond wisely to the reality that the public knows little about CSOs	29
	Lesson 5	
	Anchor narratives in unifying values	32
	Lesson 6	
	Bring values to life through storytelling	37
	Lesson 7	
	Lead with a ‘wedge issue’ already on the agenda	41
	Lesson 8	
	Consider messaging on the value of the civil society sector	45
	Lesson 9	
	Engage strategic messengers beyond your base of allies	48
	Lesson 10	
	Invest in message testing – don’t rely only on instincts!	51
SECTION 5	Proactive Strategic Communications Responses	54
SECTION 6	Advocacy cases countering civic space restrictions	57
	Bibliography	69
	About the resource and project	71

INTRODUCTION

When political leaders with anti-democratic or authoritarian tendencies take office, they seek to stifle criticism, deliberation and the institutional checks and balances we expect in a democracy¹. Installing loyalists into executive and political offices may be the first step, soon to be followed by targeting the independence of courts, the media and civil society organisations (CSOs²). It is these attempts to stifle and undermine the functioning of an effective and thriving civil society that is referred to by many as the phenomenon of ‘shrinking civic space’³. These tactics are considered such a significant threat that many key actors are proposing strategies to respond and counter the shrinking of civic space⁴.

Our work on this issue, and the work of partners and supporters of the sector, shows that patterns have become evident across contexts (including those considered more democratic) aiming to erode trust in the civil society sector and undermine the legitimate role the sector plays⁵. As a result, CSOs are under enormous pressure and are often on the backfoot, trying to defend themselves against the range of legal measures and narratives attacks that seek to undermine, defame and vilify individuals, organisations and/or the whole sector. **We have developed this guide for everyone concerned with this growing pattern of democratic backsliding, to support preventive strategies and more importantly, to move on from the focus on commenting on the erosion of democracy to empowering actors to proactively respond.**

In this guide, we share the lessons learned from supporting CSOs and civil society coalitions for more than 10 years to [design, experiment and implement narrative change campaigns](#) that seek to restore and rebuild public support for progressive values, and specifically working on civic space narratives with a CSO coalition in Kazakhstan for six years. In addition, in line with the calls for preventive strategies, we suggest a **proactive**

1 Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#).

2 EU (2023) [Civil Society Organisation](#); UNDP (2012) [NGOs and CSOs: A Note on Terminology](#)

3 Ariadne (2016) [Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders](#); Brechenmacher, Saskia & Thomas Carothers, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace (2019) [Defending Civic Space: Is the International Community Stuck?](#); Carothers, Thomas & Saskia Brechenmacher, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace (2014) [Closing Space: Democracy And Human Rights Support Under Fire](#); Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#).

4 Civicus (2019) [Against the wave: Civil society responses to anti-rights groups](#); Fundamental Rights Agency (2021), [Protecting civic space in the EU](#); Fundamental Rights Agency (2023) [Protecting civil society – Update 2023](#); International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (2018) [Effective Donor Responses to the Challenge of Closing Civic Space](#); OECD (2022) [The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment With International Standards And Guidance](#); Open Government Partnership (2021) [Actions to Protect and Enhance Civic Space](#); United Nations (2020) [Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#)

5 For example, in its most recent update on civic space issues, the Fundamental Rights Agency of the EU called for preventive measures on civic space that have up to now been implemented in accession and Eastern Partnership countries, to now be implemented within the EU. See: Fundamental Rights Agency (2023) [Protecting civil society – Update 2023](#)

approach to communications designed to complement the more commonly used legal, policy and diplomatic levers in response to civic space attacks.

Intended users for the guide

This resource is intended to support CSOs and allies working to support and safeguard civic space and democracy. More specifically, it aims **to support those directly involved in designing and leading public advocacy and narrative change campaigns to engage the more sceptical segments of the public**, i.e. those who can tip the balance in whether measures to shrink civic space go ahead. It is worth noting that these lessons and insights, having first assessed safety concerns, can also be applied in more authoritarian states, as leaders in such contexts are very concerned with maintaining public support⁶. Hence, we hope the practice and guidelines in this resource will have a broad reach, relevance and use.

Overview of the guide

The lessons and practice in this resource have been **developed from extensive empirically-tested narrative change campaigning experience with a coalition in the challenging environment of Kazakhstan**. This work was led by a local coalition⁷ and focused on a narrative change campaign called #Azamabol (#GoodCitizen)⁸, which proved that storytelling and messaging based on shared unifying values can significantly shift attitudes in the positive on CSOs. In addition, we conducted **primary research on campaigns that successfully fought back proposals to introduce so-called ‘foreign agents’ laws in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan in the mid-2010’s**, and analysed published case studies of civic space campaigning from 31 other countries. (See Section 6 for more on the case specifics). It is worth noting that as we finalise this work, the situation in Kyrgyzstan has changed for the worse and a foreign agents law very similar to the one discussed in the case study was passed in April 2024.⁹

At the broader level, we open this guide by explaining the idea of civic space, how it shrinks and the common responses (See Section 2). As our main focus is on narrative change, we have also put together a frame map of the most common attack narratives used in attempts to shrink civic space (See Section 3). We hope that this can help all partners to recognise the relatively predictable playbook of narrative attacks to inform

⁶ Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#).

⁷ The Kazakh coalition was led by [MediaNet](#), in collaboration with [PaperLab](#) and [Soros Foundation Kazakhstan](#).

⁸ MediaNet (2021) [Azamatbol Campaign Facebook Page](#)

⁹ The Diplomat (2024) [Kyrgyzstan Adopts Law Targeting Foreign-Funded NGOs](#)

responses. In addition, we have also developed a proposal for a proactive preventive strategy to keep proposals to shrink civic space off the agenda (See Section 5). In fact, the change noted above in Kyrgyzstan over the last decade where restrictive legal proposals go off the agenda and then back on under changing politics/circumstances, provides strong backing to consider such preventative measures.

At the more practical campaigning level, we have developed 10 lessons that we found to be key to an effective narrative change response (See Section 4). In each lesson, we open with an accessible explanation of the lesson in 'Essence' and 'Insight' sections. We then illustrate the real-life application of the lesson in the campaign cases we have worked on and/or analysed. Lastly, we provide key guidance on applying the lesson in practice (and what you can get wrong) in an 'Action' section.

These 10 lessons combined provide guidance on a tried and tested proactive narrative change approach that can be used as a preventive measure on its own or can complement legal, policy and diplomatic levers which together serve to protect civic space. Behind each lesson, there is a wealth of further insight, and we provide links throughout to our [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit](#) and [Strategic Communications Knowledge Base](#), as well as many other resources and sources.

OVERVIEW OF SHRINKING CIVIC SPACE

With the rise of populism and democratic backsliding in recent times¹⁰, attempts to shrink the space for civic action of civil society organisations (CSOs) are spreading at a worrying pace¹¹. To frame this resource, it's important to explain our **understanding of the term “civic space” and also why it needs protection in a healthy and thriving democracy**. In addition, this section also breaks down how civic space restrictions are often introduced and the common responses of CSOs and their allies to fight them.

What is civic space and why does it matter?

The global civic society alliance, Civicus, provides a very useful definition that gets to the heart of the matter:

“Civic space is the bedrock of any open and democratic society. **When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance**. In doing so, they are able to claim their rights and influence the political and social structures around them.”¹²

To break this out to a more basic rights definition, civic space is concerned with the protection of the following three rights for civil society:

1. **Freedom of Association** — the right to form or participate in a group intended to voice concerns and promote certain interests and values, e.g. in NGOs, political parties, unions or associations.
2. **Freedom of Assembly** — the right for people meet in public or private and voice their opinions on issues of public concern, e.g. in meetings, demonstrations, events or strikes.
3. **Freedom of Expression** — the right for people to hold and share their opinions on issues without fear of sanction or reprisal from the state. The discussion around this right is often focused on freedom of expression in the media and social media platforms.

¹⁰ Freedom House (2024) [Democracies in Decline](#)

¹¹ Civicus (2024) [Tracking Civic Space Monitor](#)

¹² Civicus (2023) [What is Civic Space?](#)

A recent report by the OECD incorporates these three rights within four practical dimensions that outline how a healthy civic space can be maintained: **civic freedoms**; **the enabling environment for civil society**; **access to information**; and **media freedoms/civic space in the digital age** (See Figure 1 below). Under each of these dimensions, they then breakdown the important aspects of policy, law and enabling environment that are needed. However, these aspects are also used as the entry points to restrict civic space, e.g. legal frameworks, access to funding, open internet.

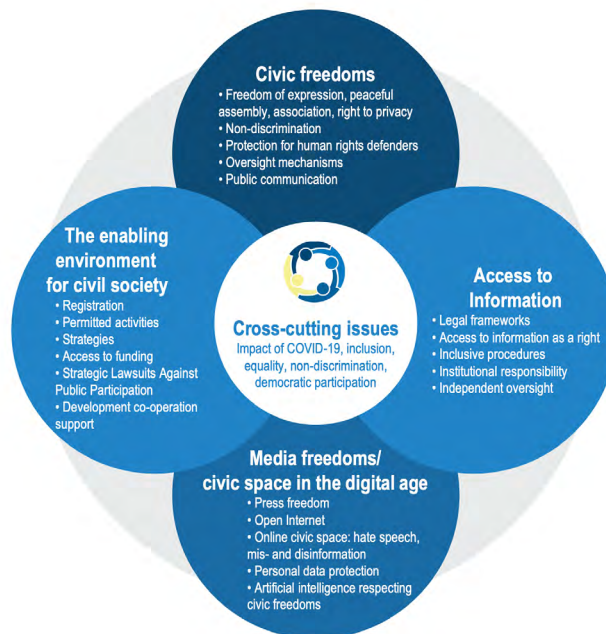


Figure 1_ The dimensions of civic space (OECD 2022)¹³

For many in the civil society sector, their everyday concerns are understandably focused on the constituency they represent, the issues they work on, as well as organisational growth and sustainability. But **civic space rights are the foundations of a CSO's institutional house, and like everyone who lives in a house, you focus on the condition and upkeep of the parts of the house and garden above ground, and assume that the foundations stay secure. Unfortunately, it is exactly these foundations that are under attack when civic space shrinks** and therefore, effective responses need to be a concern for all who are directly involved and for those who value the role of civil society

13 OECD (2022) [The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment With International Standards And Guidance](#)

(also known as the 3rd sector) in any democracy. The danger is that the sector will eventually crumble, as restriction after restriction and attack after attack knocks the house down from the foundations.

What are the range of restrictions on civic rights that shrink space?

While a long history of attempts to restrict and obstruct civic space exists, the most well-known attack on civic space in this era is the **'Foreign Agents' law** introduced in Russia in 2012. Although there are variations, it normally involves being declared a 'foreign agent' by the Ministry of Justice, then having to label your website and all activities as those conducted by a 'foreign agent', as well as registration, burdensome reporting and aggressive court oversight that can include civil and criminal penalties. This is an **example of a more radical and aggressive measure with the intention to silence and basically, cease the operation of targeted civil society actors** who may be critical of the government (e.g. human rights NGOs) in a short time frame¹⁴. This is a model that other countries have also tried to follow, e.g. Kyrgyzstan.

More **incremental approaches** are ones that place **excessive bureaucratic and tax burdens on CSOs and aggressively litigate non-compliance, restrict access to funding, and in parallel, actively seek to undermine the reputation of the sector in public**. The aim of these incremental attacks, which have been on the increase in recent years — for example, in Hungary and Kazakhstan — is a long-term slow squeeze that significantly hampers the work of the sector in fulfilling its mission and creates a 'chilling-effect' that often leads to self-censorship¹⁵.

Whether the restrictive approach employed is incremental or more aggressive, a **common tactic** deployed to undermine trust in civil society is the **spread of defamatory, intimidating and vilifying narratives about the sector as a whole**, targeted CSOs and/or even specific individuals from the sector. See our detailed map of the narratives commonly used to attack CSOs in Section 3.

¹⁴ Amnesty (2016) [Russia: Four years of Putin's 'Foreign Agents' law to shackle and silence NGOs](#)

¹⁵ See the [Civicus Monitor](#) to see the different levels of shrinking of civic space around the globe.

What are common responses to attacks on civic rights?

While important actors have recognised this issue and provide their own prescriptions¹⁶, a very useful overview of the responses of the sector when civic rights come under attack is provided by Ariadne funders network¹⁷, with responses usually including a combination of the following levers:

1. **Legal and policy/political responses** — e.g. strategic litigation and working with supportive political factions in parliaments
2. **Evidence-based advocacy** — e.g. elaborating the quantitative and qualitative difference/contribution that CSOs make in service provision, such as health care or social services
3. **Coalition building** — e.g. gaining the support of organisations with large constituencies like church groups, private sector and community associations
4. **Diplomatic and international organisation pressure** based on commitments made to democratic standards — e.g. working with embassies to make public statements on commitments made to advance democracy, such as in the Sustainable Development Goals.
5. **A business case** for the sector — e.g. advocating on the amount of employment provided, investment generated and tax paid by the sector.
6. **Publicly-focused narrative campaigning work** — e.g. countering attack narratives and/or running public campaigns to build trust in the sector based on showing how CSOs are key to delivering on unifying values and aspirations of the state.

In the 31 cases we directly researched and/or analysed in the development of this resource (See Section 6), some combination of these levers has been used in all cases and in some, proved successful in pushing back on proposed legal changes designed to shrink civic space.

¹⁶ Civicus (2019) [Against the wave: Civil society responses to anti-rights groups](#); Fundamental Rights Agency (2021), [Protecting civic space in the EU](#); Fundamental Rights Agency (2023) [Protecting civil society – Update 2023](#); International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (2018) [Effective Donor Responses to the Challenge of Closing Civic Space](#); OECD (2022) [The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment With International Standards And Guidance](#); Open Government Partnership (2021) [Actions to Protect and Enhance Civic Space](#); United Nations (2020) [Guidance Note: Protection and Promotion of Civic Space](#)

¹⁷ Ariadne (2016) [Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders](#).

Need to consider a proactive response

What is striking about the cases we have examined is the more reactionary nature of the responses, i.e. it takes an impending civic space legal change that poses an existential challenge for CSOs to come together and act in response. This is understandable for the reasons stated above, but it is evident that such **reactive tactics alone are not proving effective as the sole measure to halt the shrinking of civic space.**

Shrinking civic space is a trend that is spreading among populist leaders globally¹⁸ and even in countries that have succeeded in preventing previous shrinking space initiatives, these threats persist (e.g. in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan). Therefore, there really is **a need to invest in proactive approaches that aims to safeguard the sector from the initiation of these attacks.** In this resource, we share insight into what works in positively shifting the narrative among the broader public — so-called ‘movable middle’ audiences — in civic space debates that can be used in reactive and proactive campaigning. To further support a proactive agenda, we have also developed **an overarching framework for a proactive narrative strategy, grounded in a longer-term strategic communications approach** (See Section 5).

¹⁸ Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#).

COMMON ATTACK NARRATIVES

As outlined in the previous introductory section on civic space (See Section 2), restrictions on civic space range from incremental (e.g. public defamation, heavy tax burdens, excessive bureaucracy) to radical (e.g. shutting down organisations, violent attacks, imprisonment), with all measures designed to cripple the sector. **A set of narratives commonly used to attack and undermine trust in the sector are at the heart of preparing the ground for these kinds of restrictive actions on civic space.**

This section details the common patterns of these dominant attack narratives based on an analysis of 31 cases from around the globe (See Section 6), mapping such narratives in different contexts, and key literature from the field¹⁹. We have adapted and fleshed out the outline of the main narratives (detailed below in Table 1) with stakeholders directly affected by civic space issues in numerous trainings and presentations since 2017. To get a balanced perspective, we also recommend, **in addition to understanding the negative attack narratives, conducting a mapping of the more positive narratives that exist around the discussion of civic rights and CSOs to find a way to ‘change the weather’**. For more on this, see Lesson 2 in Section 4.

Tactics and purposes of attack narratives

Our work on analysing narrative tactics and mapping sets of narratives used for such attack purposes on CSOs, as well as the work of others, shows that **a playbook on narrative tactics for aspiring authoritarians exists**²⁰. With small adaptations for messaging that shape them in a culturally relevant way, the set of attack narratives are quite similar from country to country. It was an important realisation for us that there is ‘method in the madness’ around such attack narratives. Hence, **a first step in empowering civil society to respond strategically and tactically** (rather than just be in reactive mode) **is understanding the nature and purpose of these common set of narratives attacking civic space**. Having this insight also means that it is possible to design communications response strategies that inform action nationally and on a wider global level.

¹⁹ Ariadne (2016) [Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders](#); Carothers, Thomas & Saskia Brechenmacher (2014) [Closing Space: Democracy And Human Rights Support Under Fire](#); Carnegie Endowment For International Peace. & Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#); Fundamental Rights Agency (2021), [Protecting civic space in the EU](#); International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law (2018) [Effective Donor Responses to the Challenge of Closing Civic Space](#); Israel Butler, Liberties (2021). [How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns](#); LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#); OECD (2022) [The Protection and Promotion of Civic Space: Strengthening Alignment With International Standards And Guidance](#).

²⁰ Freedom House (2017) [Breaking Down Democracy: Goals, Strategies, and Methods of Modern Authoritarians](#)

A useful way to understand **the narrative attack strategy** is that it **aims to distract, divide and detach**²¹. More specifically:

- **Distract** — Putting civil society on the defensive so CSOs can't continue to fulfil their everyday work;
- **Divide** — Separating 'good' CSOs (often community groups, churches, unions, sports clubs) from those targeted in attacks, e.g. human rights groups, watchdogs and think tanks/researchers. Those targeted are often focused on tackling corruption and violation of rights, and monitoring elections;
- **Detach** — Actively undermining public trust in the civil society sector.

Whether used individually or combined in a communications package, **the set of narratives are used to justify some combination of the following set of actions** targeting CSOs:

- Strict and burdensome reporting and auditing requirements
- Laws to restrict access to or use of foreign funding and international banking
- Aggressive, expensive and slow court procedures for those who infringe reporting guidelines
- Revocation of CSO legal status
- 'Foreign Agents' laws which force CSOs to label themselves in public as 'traitors'
- Closure of organisations
- Arrest, detention and prosecution

For example, the main line of narrative attack in Kazakhstan since 2015 frames CSOs as inefficient, wasteful, not transparent and not aligned with national priorities. The lesser lines that are used in this 'communications package' are focused on 'Good' versus 'Bad', with the 'bad' CSOs portrayed as foreign agents. This has led to a more incremental package of legal actions which started with very burdensome reporting and auditing requirements, restrictive tax laws which place obstacles on accessing foreign funding and working with foreign partners, and aggressive court actions for non-compliance that threaten suspension and shutdown²². Most recently, in an intimidation and defa-

²¹ Transparency and Accountability Initiative (2017) [Distract, Divide, Detach: Using Transparency and Accountability to Justify Regulation of Civil Society Organizations](#)

²² ICNL (2024) [Kazakhstan Monitor](#)

mation effort, a list was compiled by state authorities of those receiving foreign funding, and this list was made public²³.

Dominant narratives attacking civil society

The following diagram provides an overview of the commonly used attack frames:

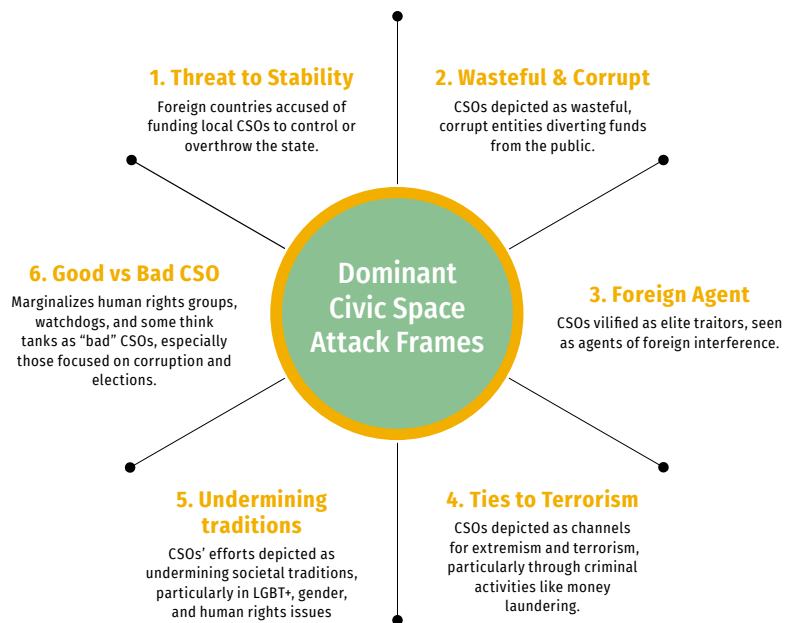


Figure 2 _ Dominant Civic Space Attack Narratives (ICPA 2024)

The table below provides a more detailed breakdown of each narrative. The order relates to the prevalence of usage in the global cases analysed. Apart from the 'foreign agent' narrative which is a term derived from the Russian 2012 law, we have named each narrative to capture the essence of the accusation and attack.

It is worth noting that many of these narratives are grounded in conspiracy thinking and theories, for example, the 'Great Replacement' theory²⁴. We are currently experimenting through a project in Germany — [Proactive Protection – Inoculating against Extremist Conspiracy Narratives towards NGOs](#) — to change the public narrative around CSOs who come under attack from those pushing conspiracy thinking and narratives.

²³ The Diplomat (2023) [Kazakhstan Publishes List of Entities and Individuals Receiving Foreign Funding. When is a list not just a list?](#)

²⁴ "Proponents of the so-called 'Great Replacement' theory argue that white European populations are being deliberately replaced at an ethnic and cultural level through migration and the growth of minority communities", Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024) [ISD Explainers: "The Great Replacement"](#).

Narrative	Explanation and Illustration
<p data-bbox="113 476 173 537">1</p> <p data-bbox="319 384 449 452">‘Threat to stability’</p> <p data-bbox="291 486 482 545">Present in 72% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="329 550 442 576">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="281 582 492 641">Nepal, Kazakhstan, Bahrain, Guatemala</p>	<p data-bbox="567 323 1192 510">This narrative builds on old Cold War/imperialism frames to claim that some Western countries have a plan to meddle, control or even overthrow the state through foreign funding. Following this logic, these foreign actors and their local CSO partners are accused of representing a threat to stability.</p> <p data-bbox="567 532 1192 589">In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the so-called ‘Colour Revolutions’ are often cited as evidence for this narrative.</p> <p data-bbox="567 611 1180 698">It is commonly used in combination with the ‘Undermining Traditions’, ‘Foreign Agent’ and ‘Ties to Terrorism’ frames.</p>
<p data-bbox="113 935 173 996">2</p> <p data-bbox="309 818 463 887">‘Wasteful & Corrupt’</p> <p data-bbox="291 920 482 979">Present in 61% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="329 984 442 1010">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="281 1016 492 1075">Ecuador, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Nepal</p>	<p data-bbox="567 741 1192 927">In this narrative, CSOs are portrayed as inefficient, wasteful of money who take funding from the ‘real’ people and are not contributing to national plans or priorities. In addition, the frame accuses CSOs of not being transparent about what they do with funds, and are thereby, portrayed as corrupt.</p> <p data-bbox="567 949 1180 1071">In Kazakhstan, this frame is captured in the accusation that CSOs are “grant eaters” and this is used to justify heavily increased government oversight under the guise of holding CSOs accountable.</p> <p data-bbox="567 1094 1163 1151">It is commonly used in combination with the ‘Threat to Stability’ and ‘Undermining Traditions’ frames.</p>
<p data-bbox="113 1382 173 1443">3</p> <p data-bbox="287 1317 484 1350">‘Foreign Agent’</p> <p data-bbox="291 1386 482 1445">Present in 44% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="329 1450 442 1476">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="299 1482 473 1541">Hungary, Kenya, Malaysia</p>	<p data-bbox="567 1190 1192 1410">In this narrative, CSOs are portrayed and vilified as corrupt, entitled elite who act as partners of meddling foreign entities. This ‘traitor’ motif often builds on ideas of a big globalist conspiracy at play. Depending on the culture, this narrative often links to antisemitism (e.g. how George Soros is depicted by many states) or other figures who have become historical bogeymen.</p> <p data-bbox="567 1432 1192 1585">Not surprisingly, this narrative is directly tied to so-called ‘foreign agent’ laws which force CSOs to mark themselves in public as traitors, which serves to undermine their reputation. This often leads to intimidation, hate speech and even violence against CSOs.</p> <p data-bbox="567 1607 1163 1665">It is commonly used in combination with the ‘Threat to Stability’ and ‘Undermining Traditions’ frames.</p>

Narrative	Explanation and Illustration
<p data-bbox="133 378 161 415">4</p> <p data-bbox="319 279 452 347"><u>'Ties to terrorism'</u></p> <p data-bbox="291 380 481 439">Present in 39% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="330 445 442 469">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="301 476 471 534">Mexico, Nigeria, Kyrgyzstan</p>	<p data-bbox="568 266 1201 356">In this narrative, CSOs are framed as a conduit for extremism and terrorism, especially in the accusation of facilitating criminality and corruption through money laundering</p> <p data-bbox="568 376 1173 467">Post 9/11, this narrative has led to many restrictions on banking and access to funding for CSOs, especially from foreign sources²⁵.</p> <p data-bbox="568 487 1163 545">It is commonly used in combination with the 'Threat to Stability' frame.</p>
<p data-bbox="133 729 161 766">5</p> <p data-bbox="295 630 477 698"><u>'Undermining Traditions'</u></p> <p data-bbox="291 733 481 792">Present in 28% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="330 798 442 822">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="285 829 487 887">Nepal, Kazakhstan, Uganda</p>	<p data-bbox="568 585 1201 741">This narrative frames the work of CSOs as a threat to the state-defined fabric of societal traditions — often focused on the family - and involves heavy criticism of LGBT+ and gender issues, human rights, secularism, and even democracy agendas.</p> <p data-bbox="568 761 1183 851">This narrative finds resonance among traditionalists and has driven a global right-wing religious coalition seeking to protect “the family”²⁶.</p> <p data-bbox="568 872 1163 929">It is commonly used in combination with the 'Threat to Stability' and 'Foreign Agent' frames.</p>
<p data-bbox="133 1191 161 1228">6</p> <p data-bbox="288 1110 484 1179"><u>'Good' vs 'Bad' CSOs</u></p> <p data-bbox="291 1214 481 1273">Present in 11% of cases analysed</p> <p data-bbox="330 1278 442 1302">Examples:</p> <p data-bbox="273 1310 498 1334">Kazakhstan, Hungary</p>	<p data-bbox="568 970 1201 1190">This frame seeks to define and marginalise human rights groups, watchdogs and certain think tanks (often focused on tackling corruption and violation of rights, and monitoring elections) as 'bad'. It also contrasts them with the perceived 'good' CSOs, such as community groups, football associations, unions, churches, and those who toe the political line — often GONGOs²⁷.</p> <p data-bbox="568 1197 1167 1254">This frame is commonly used to justify funding of CSOs who are more in line with government, i.e. GONGOs.</p> <p data-bbox="568 1275 1187 1398">While the good/bad wording is not literally used in many cases, it is often implied behind the vilification of CSOs as traitors, undermining stability and not supporting the national project.</p> <p data-bbox="568 1419 1135 1476">It is often used in combination with any of the other frames used to explain and portray the “bad” CSOs.</p>

Table 1 _ Dominant Civic Space Attack Narratives in Detail (ICPA 2024)

25 Including international banking oversight procedures like The Financial Action Task Force (2024) [What we do?](#)

26 For example, World Congress of Families (2019) [Verona – The Wind of Change: Europe and the Global Pro-Family Movement About the Congress](#)

27 “A government-organized non-governmental organization (GONGO) is a non-governmental organization that was set up or sponsored by a government in order to further its political interests and mimic the civic groups and civil society at home, or promote its international or geopolitical interests abroad”, [Wikipedia](#) (2024).

10 CORE LESSONS FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE PRACTICE

Building a Strategy

Lesson 1

Take back the agenda to ‘change the weather’

Lesson 2

Map potential openings, not just the attack narratives

Lesson 3

The ‘movable middle’ are key to building support for CSOs at scale

Lesson 4

Respond wisely to the reality that the public knows little about CSOs

Lesson 5

Anchor narratives in unifying values

Lesson 6

Bring values to life through storytelling

Lesson 7

Lead with a ‘wedge issue’ already on the agenda

Lesson 8

Consider messaging on the value of the civil society sector

Lesson 9

Engage strategic messengers beyond your base of allies

Lesson 10

Invest in message testing — don’t rely only on instincts!

Messaging and Campaigning

Lesson 1

TAKE BACK THE AGENDA TO 'CHANGE THE WEATHER'

Essence

01

Create and **drive a new narrative space on civil society to change the debate**, and ultimately **favourably change attitudes**, rather than staying stuck in countering existing anti-CSO narratives.

02

03

Insight

04

Given the personal and reputational nature of common civic space attacks, there is an understandable tendency for those targeted to be angry and adopt a communications strategy focused on defending their reputation by countering defaming and vilifying narratives. While such responses are necessary for CSO actors to defend themselves in public and mobilise supporters, they are normally not sufficient to ensure support and to favourably shift broader public attitudes about the civil society sector.

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The theory and practice of framing shows that solely negating the opposition means you are trapped in their narrative and in the end, they are the ones setting the agenda²⁸. For example, **if you focus on continually arguing that your CSO is NOT a 'foreign agent', you are keeping the accusation on the agenda** and for many people, the foreign agent frame is all they will hear or remember and actually end up associating this with you! By focusing on countering the attack narrative, you are in essence **playing the game on the opposition field**, rather than proactively leading from the front.

In order to take back the agenda and create a broader narrative space, it is also **vital to invest in steering the public debate more favourably towards CSOs**. Leading with your values and building presence of the stories you want to tell serves to set a different and more positive agenda and rebalances the debate, i.e. **change the weather**. This idea of leading the debate from the front is also one of [our guiding principles on effective strategic communications](#).

LESSON

28 ICPA (2018) [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit: Understanding the Power of Frames](#); Lakoff, George (2014). Don't think of an elephant! know your values and frame the debate. 2nd Edition. White River Junction, Vt, Chelsea Green Pub.

Cases

Kazakhstan

A national CSO coalition worked to rebalance the public debate on civil society after burdensome reporting obligations and heavy tax restrictions on foreign funding were introduced in 2015, together with strong accusatory narratives about CSOs (e.g. that they're "grant eaters" serving foreign interests). The CSOs involved also identified the danger of even stronger restrictions to come. So, the coalition developed a narrative change campaign, #Azamabol (#GoodCitizen) to start a preventative response and change the weather away from stories of Western meddling and foreign agendas and onto **the contribution of CSOs to shared goals and aspirations of all citizens, such as supporting local communities and groups in need**. A series of tests showed that these agenda setting messages and stories proved effective in significantly shifting public attitudes in the positive direction.

→ See **section 5** for more detail and background on this case

Action

Start well before a crisis as a pre-emptive strike — It's relatively easy to identify the kind of political leadership that would attempt to shrink civic space. So, even if they are not currently in government, you can basically be sure that attacks on CSOs will be embedded in their political agenda. A close monitoring of political discourse, parties' manifestos, events etc. should be enough to see the threat posed, build support and get started working on safeguarding and promoting public trust in the sector. Presenting this as a preventative longer-term intervention will help in building your coalition and get started on this communications work in quieter times.

→ See more on a proactive communications strategy in **Section 5**

Invest the time needed for the narrative and story development process — Before taking the work to scale, it's a good idea to look at your work through the lens of the unifying narratives in your strategy (See Lesson 5) and start seeing stories in your everyday work, including with partners and beneficiaries of your work. In this way, you can build up a bank of stories to have at hand for use in campaigning. Many resources exist to provide guidance on process and practical tools, [including our resources](#).

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON



What you can get wrong

Waiting until an attack is launched before starting to build support for this communications work — the work of coalition building and securing funding for such a communications effort takes time, and it’s wise to invest in this as an ongoing activity to ensure your response is timely. See our [10 keys on mobilising strategic communications coalitions](#) for guidance. For example, Key 1 urges coalitions to “Seek unity, not uniformity”, meaning that while members should agree on an overall narrative strategy, members also need to be allowed space to message in ways that is authentic and honest for them.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10**LESSON**

Lesson 2

MAP POTENTIAL OPENINGS, NOT JUST THE NEGATIVE NARRATIVES

01

Essence

02

Conduct or **commission mapping to identify potential narrative openings that can build public support**, as well as mapping to understand the range of existing vilifying and attack narratives about CSOs.

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Insight

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The majority of those mapping public attitudes and narratives around civic space are monitoring the growth or prevalence of what are often called ‘toxic’ narratives, e.g. portrayal of CSOs as ‘foreign agents’ or accusations of CSOs being corrupt or inefficient – what we have called the attack narratives. Such work is very valuable as an early warning, but if your goal is to find narrative openings that resonate with broader audiences and to set your own agenda in the public debate (see lesson 1), it is also key to understand the possible frames that could be used to build positive public support in the current debate around civic space.

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More specifically, if you **expand your framing to better understand the discussion around CSOs and civic rights and participation (rather than only civic space)**, you will be able to see positivity and existing support in public attitudes around issues like freedom of speech, space for protest or community action. If your only focus is on mapping the negative, then the only real logical response is to counter that aggression with communication efforts focused on negating those attack narratives. Seeing more possible openings allows a different approach.

A further issue we experienced that keeps people fixed on negating attack narratives is that CSOs often see positive messaging as somehow naïve or wishful thinking. Provi-

ding significant evidence of potential positive openings will be key to get such healthily sceptical partners on board for a communications strategy to ‘change the weather’

Cases

Kazakhstan

In building a frame map of the civic space and rights debate based on internet scraping¹, we identified **that while threat narratives were evident** (e.g. CSOs accused of being ‘grant eaters’ and accused of being a threat to stability and national values), **in fact, the larger part of the debate on civic rights showed openings and opportunity to build support around frames of charity and independent community action**, as well as frustration with authoritarian governance. See [overview of the full frames map](#) and set of positive frames in the visual below:

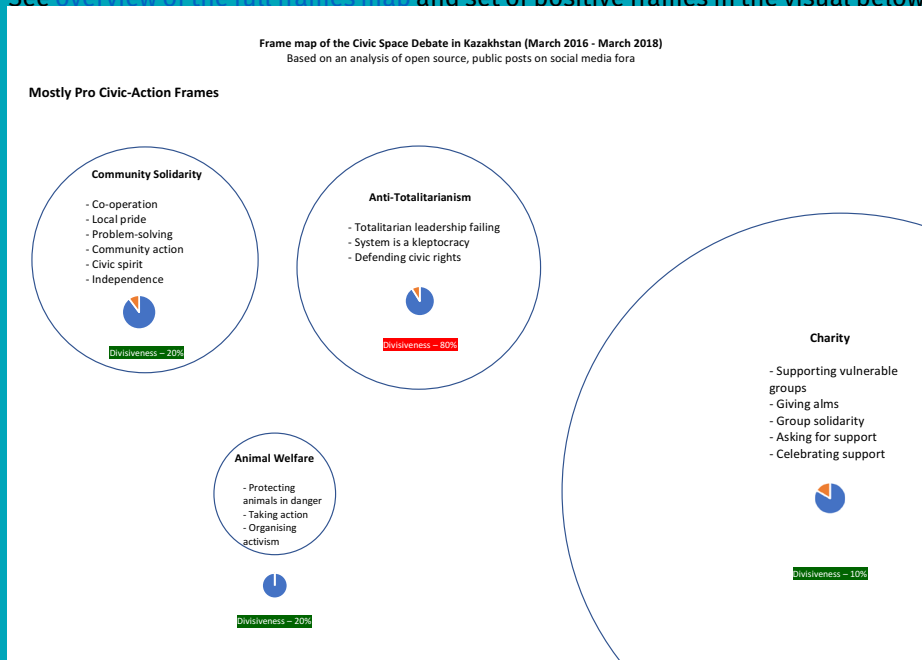


Figure 3 _ Positive frames found in civic space debate in Kazakhstan

¹ To understand frame maps and how to use them, see ICPA (2018) [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit – Target middle segments & their current frames](#)

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

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Kazakhstan

The results contained in this mapping also changed the approach and expanded the perspective of campaigners, with one Kazakh CSO coalition partner telling us: “our assumption before mapping was that all the public think is of NGOs as grant eaters, but there was a ton more positive stuff out there”.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more detail and background on the case.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Following a similar approach, **it is also possible to build on ‘wedge issues’ that already have a much broader appeal with the public**, such as education or social welfare, and connect civic space to these issues for campaigning purposes²⁹. This is another approach to finding more positive openings and value appeals that can serve as a door opener.

→ See **lesson 7** for more on wedge issues

Action

Expand the circle of your ask to ensure the positive is included – When commissioning an analysis, social listening or polling of current public attitudes, expand out the ask to go beyond just a focus on the debate around civic space. Instead ask to understand the debate around CSOs, civic rights (assembly, association and free speech) and public participation. In this way, you’ll get the data on potential positive openings, as well as a picture of the negative attitudes.

29 LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#).

Lesson 3

THE 'MOVABLE MIDDLE' ARE KEY TO BUILDING SUPPORT FOR CSOS AT SCALE

Essence

It's motivating to know that **it IS possible to get a majority of the public on board to support civil society!** And getting support from the persuadable majority in the middle can be the key to achieving attitude change at scale.

Insight

Many CSOs operating in more authoritarian contexts understandably doubt the chances of (re)building support and trust in the civil society sector and civic action beyond the sector and its supporters. This doubt comes from the harshness of the widely shared vilification narratives and smear campaigns on CSOs, and the increasing uptake of such narratives online among the wider public. This despair is understandable in some contexts as the narrative attacks and clampdowns on the sector are intense and continue with impunity.

However, this is far from being a lost cause! The good news is that extensive polling and segmentation of public attitudes shows that **the majority of the public (often 60% to 70%) lie between strong supporters and opponents at either end of the spectrum**³⁰. We are among many other narrative change practitioners and experts who call this majority the 'persuadable' or 'movable' middle' or 'balancers'. Such movable middle segments tend to be:

- those who are not that involved or engaged in the target issue;
- quite easily influenced and convinced by the dominant public narratives;

³⁰ More in Common have conducted [attitude segmentation research on many issues including NGOs, democracy and civic rights](#). In partnership with the Kazakh think tank, PaperLab, we adopted this methodology in commissioning similar research in Kazakhstan, which is shown in the case box.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

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LESSON

→ quite conflicted, anxious and frustrated about ongoing debates.

In our experience, these middle segments in civic space debates care about democracy and civic rights, but are also influenced by attack narratives that undermine trust in CSOs. The good news is that our empirically-tested **experience in Kazakhstan and Germany has shown that effective messaging to these groups on shared values, aspirations and concerns** (also around wedge issues) **can lead to a significant positive shift in their attitudes on CSOs**. Hence, convincing these audiences is key to creating the public support needed to prevent further attacks and restrictions on civic space.

A caveat that we repeat as often as possible: Such a middle-oriented strategy is NOT intended to replace work to mobilise supporters and/or marginalise opponents. We advocate for adding this middle-oriented approach to your broader advocacy toolbox, if this is a suitable strategy for you and your organisation. Hence, the strategy we (and others) propose is a **“both/and, not either/or”³¹ approach**

→ See [narrative change key, number 1 for more on this](#)

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

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LESSON

Cases

Kazakhstan

The diagram below shows attitude segmentation of the Kazakh population on civic space issues with over **75% of the population seen to hold middle views** and categorised in four segments (in the red box), from the more liberal ‘Disenchanted Democrats’ and ‘Realists’ to the more challenging ‘Conflicted Optimists’ and ‘Satisfied Conservatives’. The campaign videos and social media content from the #Azamatbol campaign¹ targeting three of these middle segments achieved **a significant shift in public attitudes on key attitudes to CSOs and civic engagement in the positive**.

→ See the **cases section** on for more details on the evaluation results of the Kazakh campaign

¹ MediaNet (2021) [Azamatbol Campaign Facebook Page](#)

³¹ Frank Sharry, America’s Voice

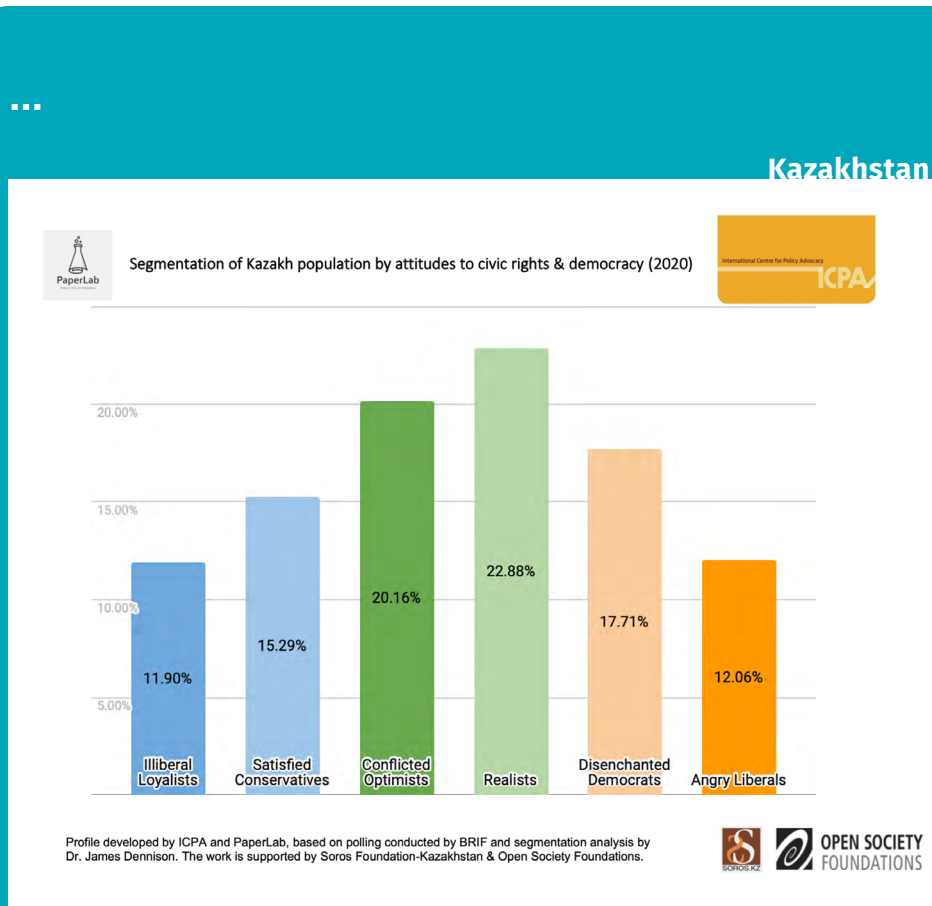


Figure 4 _ Positive frames found in civic space debate in Kazakhstan

Hungary

Instead of getting caught up in the polarising and demoralising back and forth of government attacks on their organisation and the civil society sector, Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (**HCLU**) **decided to try to expand its support with the persuadable middle by sharing the positive, hopeful and human stories of those they support** and of the staff of the organisation in a campaign called 'HCLU is needed!'². As reported, this succeeded in significantly expanding their social me-

² Kapronczay & Kertesz, Global Dialogues (2018) [Dropping the defence: hopeful stories fight stigma in Hungary](#).

dia following and donations in a period of ongoing public attacks³.

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Egypt

Human rights defenders who support victims of domestic violence came under attack from the authorities as alleged promoters of ‘Western values’, making it increasingly difficult for them to do their community work, as the attacks led to a hostile and dangerous environment. Working to reduce anxiety among movable middle families, **they were able to engage religious leaders as their messengers who successfully argued the key role of CSOs**, especially that those protecting women’s rights make to families and the stability of the country. This intervention served to rebuild trust at the local levels and allowed them to return to their clients in safety⁴.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more detail and background on the Kazakh case and footnotes for the others.

³ LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#)

⁴ LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#)

Action

Get access to or commission segmentation research to get a more nuanced and in-depth view of public attitudes — Having access to public opinion research which segments the public into groups based on similarity of attitude around democracy and civic action is key to understanding who to target, rather than having a generic and vague ‘general public’ or ‘majority’ as the stated target audience. This more granular view of public opinion, in turn, helps identify the value appeals that might work with them. If it’s not already available, ask funders to support such analysis as a crucial foundation for an evidence-grounded public advocacy effort. The resulting analysis can be used by many stakeholders once available, and committing to sharing and making such insights widely available among the sector is important.

Below is an example of a summary profile of one of the middle segments from Kazakhstan, which was an important basis for the narrative development process:

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON



Segmentation of Kazakh population by attitudes to civic rights & democracy (2020)



Realists

Moderately pro-democracy, Conflicted about the State, Pragmatic, Kazakh-speaking, More women



OPINIONS ON CIVIC RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY

ANXIETIES & DEMOGRAPHICS

Civic Rights

- Overall, views civic rights as very important
- Views freedom of speech as very important
- Views right to associate as very important
- Views right to assembly as very important

Democracy

- Unsure if democracy in Kazakhstan is working
- Tend to prioritise protection of human rights over maintenance of order
- Sees critical media and engaged political parties as very important
- Sees engaged NGOs as strongly important

Trust

- Trust government institutions highly, slightly less so with Parliament, Head of City and Nur Otan
- Trust religious organisations and on balance trust the Media
- On balance trust UN & Red Crescent but on balance don't trust Soros

Demographics

- More women
- All ages
- Average education and average incomes
- Majority Kazakhs speaking Kazakh and some Russian
- News equally from TV and internet

Civic Sector

- Weakly agrees that they can trust the NGO sector
- Weakly agrees that foreign funding is good
- Strongly believe in moral duty to help others
- Do not trust people they do not know

Governance

- Tend to support strongman leadership
- Divided on religious leadership
- Think democracy and professional governance are good

External threat

- Strongly trust Russia (but many unsure)
- Don't trust China
- Divided on the threat of the Western values

Optimism

- Optimistic about the economy and the future
- Divided on whether the state cares about citizens
- Nostalgic for Soviet times
- Have patriarchal values

Figure 5 _ Profile of one of the moveable middle segments in Kazakhstan

Personify your target audiences to help develop resonant messages — Don't leave your target audiences as research subjects; instead, think of who you know that is part of this segment, for example someone in your family, workplace or neighbourhood. In our workshops, we ask campaigners to draw an example of the kind of person belonging to the target segment. For example, the drawing below of 'Ainash Apa' ('Auntie Ainash'), belongs to the 'Conflicted Optimist' segment in Kazakhstan.

→ See the segment [profiles for all six segments of the Kazakh research](#).

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON



Figure 6 _ Personification of the 'Conflicted Optimist' segment in Kazakhstan (developed in project workshop 2018)

These activities help to humanise your target middle audiences, and to understand their motivations and anxieties. This is a key step in developing messages that have a good chance of resonating with your target audience, and as one CSO participant in Kazakhstan reported, this tool helped to always think of their target audience as real people, in their families and communities. See our toolkit for [the steps in building a full narrative change strategy](#), including these elements.

! What you can get wrong

Writing off the middle before you start, rather than focusing on understanding the segments — It is challenging to unpack and understand a segment of the public you may not agree with or even like very much. We see a tendency among progressive CSO people when observing focus groups with middle segments to harshly judge and bring a deficit view of those they're observing. However, it's so important to be open to learning about them, seeing their humanity, and even finding unexpected points of agreement between you. One of the Kazakh coalition partners we supported reflected on this in a helpful way: "There is a tendency to take their feedback in focus groups for example, and think 'oh these folks are stupid'. But take the feedback seriously even if it's not argued seriously. This is what your idea triggered — take that seriously!" To stay more open through this process, it may be useful to remember one of our narrative change keys: ['Understanding does not equal agreement!'](#)

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Lesson 4

RESPOND WISELY TO THE REALITY THAT THE GENERAL PUBLIC KNOWS LITTLE ABOUT CSOS

01

Essence

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A **narrative change approach works well when targeting less informed sceptical audiences**, as a starting point in emotionally engaging these audiences and slowly rebuilding their trust in CSOs and their work.

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Insight

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Time and time again, our experience in Europe and Central Asia has shown that **the general public has vague or little understanding about the civil society sector and its role**, but of course, this does vary from country to country. This may be less the case in contexts where civil society plays a key role in delivering core government services (such as education and healthcare), but it is often the case in contexts where civil society focuses largely on supporting vulnerable minority groups and doesn't have any significant presence in the public arena³².

07

08

09

10

LESSON

However, as outlined in the case from Kenya below, even if churches, community organisations, aid agencies and charities are the primary provider of services and infrastructure, there is little awareness that all of these types of organisations are CSOs. To quote a Kazakh campaigner after seeing opinion polling results and observing focus groups: the public “think the sector is either just charity for kids and vulnerable groups or grant eaters.”

Narrative change provides an opportunity is to respond wisely to this reality, as **there are many pathways to get to the issue that don't depend on issue knowledge as a prerequisite, and which can be used effectively to build public support and appreciation**

32 Israel Butler, Liberties (2021). [How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns.](#)

of the civil society sector. Starting by telling warm, authentic stories about CSOs that over time gain more presence in the public will begin to build a broader awareness of and more interest in the civil society sector.

Cases

Kazakhstan

In large-scale polling done in Kazakhstan by partners between 2020 and 2022, only **5% to 10% of the population said they had knowledge of or exposure to the work of civil society.** This was surprising for the CSO partners running the #Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen) campaign. Their response to this insight was to adopt a value-based storytelling approach which has proven effective in engaging the public and shifting public attitudes on CSOs towards the positive by bringing the work of CSOs closer to people's lives and issues they're concerned about. The first-hand and personal accounts of the work and contribution of four different CSOs (an environmental campaigner, a community library, 2 support groups for people with disabilities) at the heart of this campaign were effective in achieving this goal.

Kenya

Campaigners reported that **people in small towns receiving most of their services (especially health care) from INGOs, charities and churches had no realization that they are all CSOs.** The response to this reality was to focus the public messaging on the potential loss of services and development aid, rather than assuming they could argue the importance of the sector to Kenya's democracy. In addition, the campaigning coalition set a longer-term agenda for its members to commit as much as possible in their communities to explain their role as widely as possible to service providers and local partners. They also committed to put more time into being present in local community events, which gave many people a chance to understand who they are and to learn that they are a part of the CSO sector.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Action

Start where they are — There's little point in being frustrated with the public for their lack of knowledge of the work of CSOs and of the civil society sector more broadly. A key piece of advice we learned from seasoned UK campaigners is that it's better to start where the audience are. Through storytelling about CSOs built on resonant values, shared concerns and aspirations, you can develop awareness and trust, which then can lead to more interest, knowledge and possibly even uptake of civic education programmes.

Lesson 5

ANCHOR NARRATIVES IN UNIFYING VALUES

Essence

Developing narratives around unifying values establishes a shared connection with target segments. Starting on common ground then serves as an emotionally smart bridge to open a conversation focused on building support for the work of civil society.

Insight

When targeting audiences who are sceptical or apathetic about the role, work and value of civil society, you can effectively build a connection by **starting on common ground and leading with messages based on shared values.** Such values-led narratives that also layer in shared aspirations and challenges can effectively build a resonant connection with such audiences. Further, when **combined with humanising stories that bring your values to life, they build interest and open the door to a constructive debate on the issues.** This framework underpins much of ICPA's narrative change work, and is synthesised in Figure 7 below.



Lead with **Values** through **Stories** to get to **Issues**

Figure 7 _ The values-led intervention logic in ICPA's narrative change approach

In contrast, issue-led approaches that tend to focus solely on facts, rights and expertise are not as engaging for middle groups and can even backfire³³. As anxiety and frustration are key features of polarised debates, this value-led strategy recognises **the need for an emotionally smart way to open a constructive debate, which offers a good chance to shift attitudes**. We synthesise this point in one of [our narrative change keys: “Values unite, issues divide”](#). However, it is important to point out that you will get to the discussion of evidence and rights; it’s a matter of **effectively sequencing the communication**.

Finding this common ground to open debates is of particular importance to CSOs as much of their work doesn’t have public presence, especially the work of those focused on supporting and promoting the rights of marginalised communities who are not so visible³⁴. Further, beyond countries where many CSOs are large-scale service providers, the work of the sector is not well understood by the public (see lesson 4). Unfortunately, these factors make the sector relatively easy to attack! It also should motivate advocates to work on raising awareness and building the profile and presence of the sector as a key social actor among the general public. It’s time to **recognise that this is ongoing and proactive communications work, not just a one-off ad hoc campaign**, which should start well before just as or after a crisis hits, as emphasised in Lesson 1 and also in our proposal for a proactive strategic communications strategy (See Section 5).

Cases

Kazakhstan

The **#Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen)** campaign targeted three middle Kazakh segments and built messaging on the following shared **value appeals of:**

- **Community interdependence**
- **Respect for children, mothers and elders**
- **Community pride and traditions.**

The segment profiles (See Lesson 3) showed that these were among the main values of the target segments, and were selected as the campaign group was also happy to lead on these values – i.e. they are shared values. The campaign centred around stories of the work of CSOs in supporting underserved communities, e.g. with libraries, empowering children from conflict zones, and environmental

33 ICPA (2018) [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit: Understanding The Power of Frames](#)

34 Israel Butler, Liberties (2021). [How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns.](#)

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Kazakhstan

protection of local lakes¹. Focus groups and a randomised controlled trial testing of the messaging with middle audiences proved that such an approach was effective in building the interest and support levels needed to achieve significant attitude change. See cases section for more detail on the process, testing and results and [a sample video from the campaign](#).

Kyrgyzstan

In a successful CSO push-back campaign on a proposed ‘foreign agents’ type law in 2015–2016, the CSO coalition built its messages squarely on the values of:

- **Service and contribution of the CSO sector**, especially in delivering health care, providing jobs, and making a significant contribution to the national economy;
- **National development goals and pride in democratic reputation**, and the potential loss of these if the proposed laws were passed.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

¹ MediaNet (2021) [Azamatbol Campaign Facebook Page](#)

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Action

Define a resonant, overlapping and unifying value space for a campaign targeting specific middle segments — We and many of our partners use the following funnelling tool to guide this process of coming to a resonant messaging space. For guidance on conducting such a funnelling process, see [our Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit](#), including an easy to use template to complete your own positive values mapping.

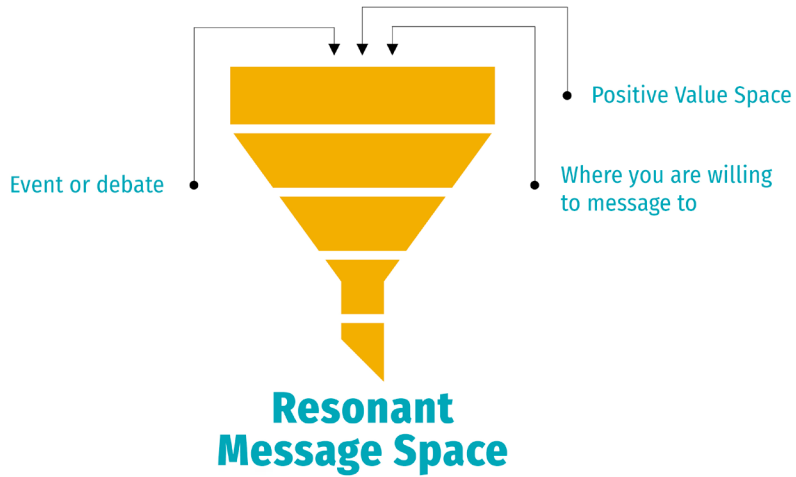


Figure 8_ Process to identify campaign value appeals shared with the target audience (from ICPA toolkit)

Work from problem or issues to values — A second tool that has worked well for campaigners we’ve supported entails writing down the specific problems or issues faced, and then identifying the values associated with these issues that might be useful to leverage to engage the target audience. This is an approach developed by Anat Shenker-Osorio³⁵ and uses the example that was effective for the LGBTQ+ movement in many countries once it moved away from a discussion of rights in public campaigning towards embracing the values of family and commitment. She suggests replacing problems and embracing values as the basis of your argument. Below are three examples of civic space problems and how they might be tackled in a value-led approach:

Replace problem	Embrace Values
Public vilification as traitor	Fairness, free speech, protection from defamation
Restrictions on foreign funding	Growth and development targets
Burdensome reporting requirements	Rule of Law & efficiency of public processes

Table 2_ Examples of replacing civic space problems with values (ICPA 2024)

→ Also see **Lesson 7** on wedge issues as yet another way to find shared concerns and values

35 Anat Shenker-Osorio, Centre for Community Change (2016) [Messaging This Moment: A Handbook for Progressive Communicators](#)

01
02
03
04
05
06
07
08
09
10
LESSON



What you can get wrong

Trying to please the middle segment rather than building a foundation for authentic engagement that can shift attitudes — It's not enough to just pick values that you know will work for the target group, but don't actually work for you and your organisation! If you find a good overlap in values, you can be authentic through all stages of campaigning and discussions. It's evident in seconds to the target audience when a messenger/campaigner is just trying to please them, as the lack of enthusiasm and authenticity is palpable! A second problem with a 'people pleasing' approach is that there is no dissonance, i.e. there's no challenge to the target audience's prejudices or stereotypes. Creating opportunities for your target audience to question current mind-sets and change attitudes is a key ingredient for the values-based approach.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

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LESSON

Lesson 6

BRING VALUES TO LIFE THROUGH STORYTELLING

Essence

Engaging storytelling is key to bringing the work of civil society to life for the general public around a set of shared values.

Insight

Stories are the connective tissue or bridge between your value appeal and the issue you want to discuss (as figure 7 in Lesson 5 shows). **Values are the foundation of narrative change, but without illustration, they can remain quite vague and conceptual.** The need to unpack values through stories is really clear during focus group discussions we run as part of the narrative development process. Strong, authentic storytelling plays a key role in making a value appeal accessible, striking and lays a foundation for the issue you want to discuss. **Good storytelling humanises the issues you're addressing, and in essence, brings your values to life.**

In civic space campaigns, storytelling often illustrates the work of CSOs and how they respond to shared challenges and/or fulfil shared aspirations for the communities they serve. There are many ways to tell these stories, and the empirically-tested practice we support shows that **having the real voices of CSO practitioners and those they serve works well in civic space storytelling** — key components in warm and authentic storytelling approach. In many focus groups tests we've conducted, such **stories with real people in recognisable communities overcoming shared challenges serves to soften the natural resistance of the group.** Such stories also help the campaign pitch, call to action and slogans make sense.

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Cases

Kazakhstan

#Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen) campaign¹ – In the development of the campaign, advocates worked hard to find CSO protagonists who could tell their **authentic stories around the target values of community protection and family support** in their own voices (e.g. [Assel](#) and [Aizada](#)). It was essential to invest time in building a relationship of trust with the protagonists to ensure they were comfortable enough to tell their story in an authentic way, rather than just turning up with cameras one week after meeting them online for the first time! These protagonists and their stories tested very well in focus groups and their stories worked to shift the attitudes of middle audiences, strengthened existing support and trust for CSOs, and reduced anxiety around common attack narratives (see cases section for details of results achieved).

Kenya

Campaigners worked with Kenyan CSO leaders who had been accused of being ‘enemies of the state’ and organised for them to do social media interviews, taking questions from the public and telling their story to **humanise them as fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, neighbours, colleagues with normal concerns, challenges and hopes**. Hence, this more emotional type of storytelling served to reframe the discussion, rather than using a factual or defensive approach centred around negating the false accusations.

Hungary

‘HCLU is needed!’ campaign: Instead of getting caught up in the polarising back and forth of defamatory government attacks, the Hungarian Civil Liberties Union (HCLU) decided to talk about what they stood for:

“by humanizing our staff...and clients. We first introduced our clients through personalized online stories that demonstrated that they are **“one of us”** and that **human rights protect everyone**. For instance, we featured an elderly woman’s story about why freedom of speech was important to her”².

This storytelling approach served to make the values and work of HCLU relatable and relevant for the target audiences, which are important factors for winning support for your cause.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

¹ Medianet (2021) [Azamatbol Campaign Facebook Page](#)

² Kapronczay & Kertesz, Global Dialogues (2018) [Dropping the defence: hopeful stories fight stigma in Hungary](#).

01

02

03

04

05

06

07

08

09

10

LESSON

Action

Nowadays, there are many good resources on effective storytelling for campaign work – the work of Marshall Ganz and Humans of New York have been particularly influential for our work³⁶. From our hands-on experience, four key principles to guide effective storytelling for civic space work are:

- **Show, not tell** – values need an affective/emotional response, not a cognitive one. So, it's better to avoid the 'talking head' explanation to camera of CSO work; rather, it's more effective to show the work in action in a dynamic and personal way.
- **Problem – Solution – Hope** – Engaging stories need suspense. Having a protagonist face and then overcome a challenge – the aspect of tension as illustrated in Figure 9 – and then resolve the story to a hopeful future of shared aspirations works well to keep audiences engaged.
The [Assel video from the Kazakh #Azamatbol \(#GoodCitizen\) campaign](#) is a good illustration of this movement.

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Engaging Story

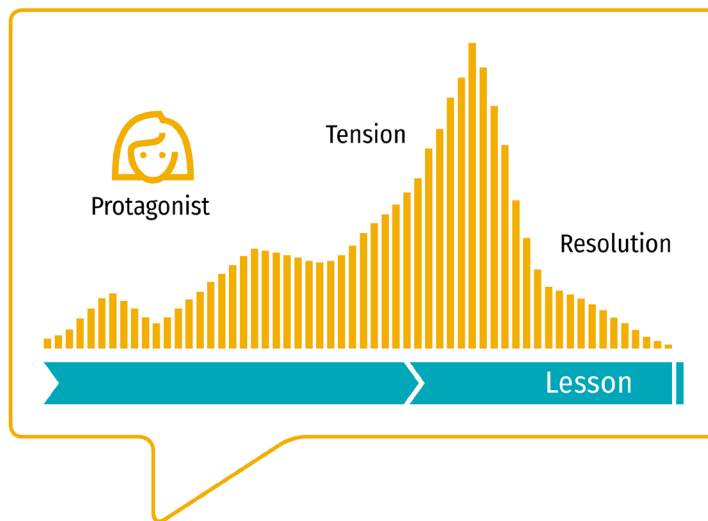


Figure 9 – The elements of an engaging story (ICPA 2018)

36 For example: 1. Narrative Arts (2016) [Marshall Ganz- Story of Self, Us, Now](#) ; 2. Lauren Girardin (2021) [5 Storytelling Best Practices at the Heart of Humans of New York](#)

→ **Authentic 1st person voice** — the people who actually overcame a challenge will always be the most convincing for the target audience, rather than their story being told second hand. Try to move beyond the facts of the story when interviewing protagonists; rather, seek to understand their hopes and fears through the experience, and share those insights in the story that's made public. An important note: It's paramount to respect that the extent to which protagonists want to share their story and this has to be determined with their full consent. **The safety of protagonists must be maintained as the top priority.**

→ **Balance resonance and dissonance** — build the story with the right amount of resonance in shared values, and also dissonance in which something unexpected happens and works to get audiences to question and reconsider their current position on an issue.

This then serves as the bridge to a discussion of your issues³⁷. Landing on this moment of what we call 'constructive confusion' is important in the process to shifting attitudes.

What you can get wrong

Only focusing on your challenge, not on stories of shared challenges — CSO practitioners are trained to talk about their own motivations and the urgency of the issue they work on. While these are essential elements of a campaign story, more emphasis often needs to be placed on telling the 'the story of us'³⁸, i.e. stories of experiences, challenges and goals shared by CSOs and their target audience.

Having a lecturer voice on — As one of our Kazakh advocates put it: "if you come over as 'talking like the state' then no one will listen". It's important to avoid being too technical or in heavy educational mode; rather you need to find an everyday voice and it needs to be authentic.

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37 For more explanation and illustrations, see Key 8 in ICPA (2018) [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit: Core Lessons](#)

38 Narrative Arts (2016) [Marshall Ganz- Story of Self, Us, Now](#)

Lesson 7

LEAD WITH A 'WEDGE ISSUE'

ALREADY ON THE AGENDA

Essence

It can be very helpful to frame a campaign around pressing issues of concern for the public – so-called **'wedge issues'** – as they **can serve as an effective entry point to a discussion on civic action and rights**, which can otherwise be quite abstract and meta for the general public.

Insight

Framing a civic space campaign in an issue that is already **a matter of public concern, e.g. education, health care, or employment**, can prove beneficial in a number of ways:

Tapping into a base of existing support – In many countries with civic space challenges, there may be significant support for a strongman leader, but at the same time, there can also be disillusionment and even anger at the performance of government in delivering key services or shortfalls in providing economic stability and opportunities for young people. If you are able to frame your campaign in one of these pressing and very 'local' issues and make a case for the key role that CSOs play in the issue, you can build your credibility and public support from a surprisingly broad spectrum of the public. Such an approach in political tactics is said to drive a wedge into a traditional supporter base, and hence, are called 'wedge issues'.

Safer than leading on civic rights issues – in many countries with authoritarian rulers where activists are being defamed, arrested or even worse, it is often not safe to campaign directly on civic rights issues to broad public audiences. For example, campaigning on the right to public protest/assembly seems to be a particularly sensitive issue and is often met with strong responses. Therefore, it's often a more fruitful route to find a less sensitive, shared issue of concern in which to frame a campaign³⁹.

39 LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#).

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Accessible illustration of the role of CSOs and importance of key rights — as well as being a bridge to a broader supporter base, choosing such wedge issues allows you to rather easily illustrate the key role that CSOs play in the more effective delivery of such services as education, welfare and healthcare and how demands for more effective participation and accountability also contribute to better outcomes. Given the fact that the majority of the public has a very vague idea of the role of CSOs (see Lesson 4), this may be a key factor in choosing a wedge issue as the main framing of a campaigning strategy.

To be clear, this lesson is not at odds with Lesson 5 which advocates for a value-based approach. **Our advice is to identify a unifying value appeal to build on around the chosen chosen wedge issue.** For example, the case below chose to frame a key message in their campaigns around the key role in of CSOs in the delivery of health care services. So, starting from an aspiration for good health and fair access to healthcare for the wider population will open a door to the issue and unify the values shared by civil society and the wider public.

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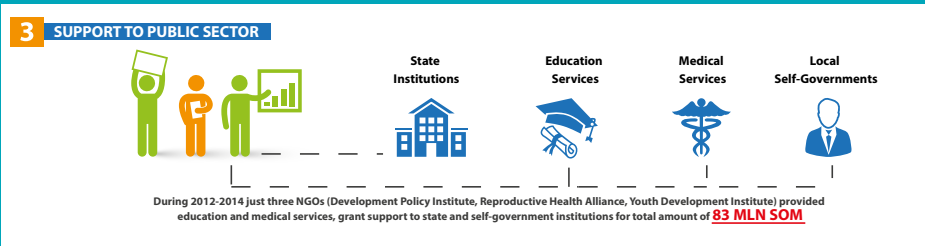
LESSON

Cases

Kyrgyzstan

The campaign aimed at fighting a proposed ‘foreign agents’ law was able to draw on two key wedge issues to frame the campaign and illustrate the key role of CSOs in these issues: **provision of services (especially health care) and the contribution of the civil society sector to the economy in contributions and providing employment.**

Delivery of services (especially health care) — One of the large-scale roles of the civil society sector is the provision of all kinds of services to people all over the country. This was particularly important to the public in the health care services area. One of the stronger messages that campaigners reported that really hit home was that the MPs proposing this anti-CSO bill would not be able to replace the services they would be de facto shutting down in passing the legislation. The figure numbered 3 below explains and quantifies the contribution of the Kyrgyz civil society sector:



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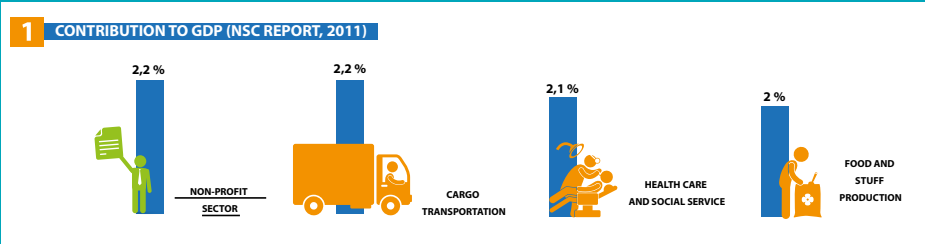
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Contribution to the economy – The campaign was able to show that the size of the civil sector in the broader economy was significant by quantifying the contribution to GDP (see Figure numbered 1 below). Additionally, the campaign determined the value of the contributions made by the sector by equating the tax payments of CSOs to pension payments (see Figure numbered 5 below). In this way, the campaign also showed what would be lost if the law were passed.

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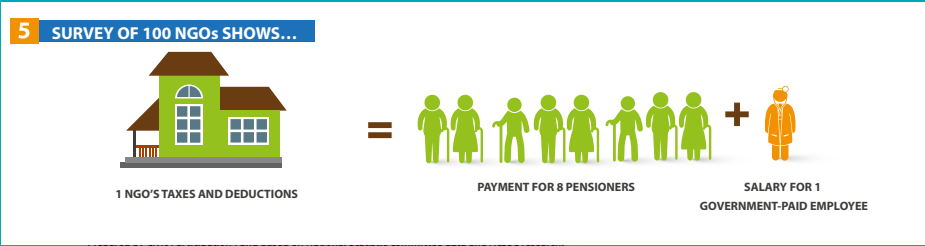


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→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

Action

Keep looking for wedge opportunities that can legitimately be connected to the work of CSOs — One of the Kazakh campaigners we supported reported that they were able to use a case of harassment of a woman on public transport that got a lot of publicity to show the key role of CSOs in supporting victims. Through this connection that made sense as a good fit with the work of the CSO in question, the organisation was able to keep this issue on the agenda through a targeted campaign.



What you can get wrong

Picking an issue that could backfire — The #Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen) campaign was being developed in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic in Kazakhstan and in such a difficult time, CSOs jumped in to fill the gaps where the government was failing. This seemed like a near perfect opportunity to lead a campaign on a wedge issue. However, after a round of testing on this framing, it became clear that such an appeal did not trigger a supportive response, but rather generated more anger and sadness as virtually everyone in the testing knew someone close who had died as a result of the virus. This may have worked at a later point, but the campaigning coalition decided to stick with more uplifting and positive stories for the planned campaign.

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Lesson 8

CONSIDER MESSAGING ON THE VALUE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY SECTOR

Essence

01 It is worth weighing up whether to take a **pragmatic approach of messaging on the**
02 **value of the civil society sector and what's at stake economically** through restrictions
on the work of CSOs.

Insight

03 The approach outlined in this lesson is definitely not to everyone's taste — some of our
04 partners have chosen to go down this route, while others decided against. However, it
05 is worth at least a consideration, as our experience and case studies have shown that
06 enumerating the value of the sector makes the issue of the civil society sector very
07 real for target audiences, and in terms they can easily grasp and relate to. This entails
08 **quantifying and enumerating the actual contribution the civil society sector makes**
to the economy of a target country, region or community, for example in salaries, tax
revenue, employment, social contributions and also possibly bringing funding to local
economies from external sources.

09 In addition, **CSOs often play a key role as service providers** through a contracting out
10 arrangement or replacing government when they are not there, especially for vulnerable
or isolated groups and communities. Further in many countries, CSOs are often leaders
in implementing social and infrastructural development plans. Therefore, **proposals to
shrink civic space can have a direct downside impact on the economy and the social
welfare of communities**, and this is not automatically obvious for the wider public.
These negative impacts can therefore, be strong arguments to build urgency in a cam-
paign.

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A more challenging approach is to build an argument on is the more abstract **value of civil society as a indicator of the health of a democracy**. To quote the Ariadne guide on tackling civic space:

“a ‘business case’ to support tolerant and open civil space is not too difficult to make, as businesses clearly benefit when the rules of the game are clear — consumers are empowered, employees are respected, and the judicial system works well”.⁴⁰

Further, when companies are assessing whether to continue investment in a particular country, they work from Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) risk assessments and CSOs act as both a source of information for such assessments and also the health of the civil society sector acts as a key indicator for social and governance risk assessment⁴¹. **Put simply, measures intending to shrink civic space reduce confidence and therefore, investment.** This point could be included in building an argument around the risk of restricting the sector, and what’s at stake if restrictive measures come into force.

Cases

Kyrgyzstan

The campaign drew on the fact that the civil society economy itself represents a significant sector in the relatively small national Kyrgyz economy. So, this enabled **the campaigners to build a key argument around the potential loss of the economic contribution of the sector, as a significant employer and tax contributor.** In addition, the sector is a main service provider in health care, with these services likely to be more or less immediately lost should the proposed law be enforced. These potential downside losses were strong arguments in the campaign and also allowed the campaign to build a broad base coalition including those from the affected public sector. On the more indicative value of the civil society sector, a number of embassies and INGOs made the argument of **the potential loss of reputation of Kyrgyzstan as a democracy leader in Central Asia** should the proposed ‘foreign agents’ law come into force.

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40 Ariadne (2016) [Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders](#).

41 Edwin Rekosh & Lamin Khadar, Rights Colab (2018) [The Business Case for Civil Society](#).

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Kenya

A similar argument centred **around service-delivery loss was also made by the Kenyan campaigners** with the private sector, MPs and large development CSOs working in impoverished areas especially worried about loss of service provision in the health sector.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

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Action

Invest in collecting the sectoral data — Continuously collecting data about the contribution of the whole civil society sector in your country does require commitment, and also involves doing the required analysis. So, if you decide to pursue this approach, this work needs to be factored into manpower. It's a worthwhile investment to be able to have this data on hand for quick usage, and it's important to remember that the data can also be used to proactively drive your message, not just in a time of crisis. This may be more suitable and realistic work for CSO coalitions who come under threat, rather than an individual organisation⁴².

Work on accessible presentation of the data — It is important to invest in good visual presentation to support the ease of communicating your main message about the value and contribution of the sector. The infographics and visual communication in the Kyrgyz case are examples of this effort (See Lesson 7).



What you can get wrong

Being all doom and gloom — This tactic involves quantifying the potential loss from measures which restrict civil society action, but this shouldn't be stand-alone messaging in a campaign, as scare tactics used on their own can backfire. When such messaging is combined with positive and uplifting messaging around the values of CSOs, a sense of balance is achieved and is proven to be an effective approach.

⁴² An example of a recent Ford Foundation funded report collecting data on the contribution of the sector in West Africa: West African Civil Society Institute (2023) [How CSOs Contribute to West Africa Development](#).

Lesson 9

ENGAGE STRATEGIC MESSENGERS

BEYOND THE BASE OF ALLIES

Essence

01 Build partnerships to **engage unusual allies trusted by your target audience in the role**
 02 **of campaign messengers** and spokespeople — they can help in overcoming existing
 scepticism towards CSOs.

Insight

03 In any advocacy initiative, [the messenger is as important as the message](#), i.e. if you
 04 can find a spokesperson or **messenger that your target audience is already inclined**
 05 **to believe and trust, you have already done half your job**. In the civic space arena,
 06 the main goal of narrative attacks is to undermine trust in the civil society sector, and
 07 is often achieved through aggressive defamation, vilification and smear campaigns. In
 08 working to effectively reach and engage broader public audiences, getting as many of
 the trusted messengers and influencers of the movable middle to publicly support your
 position is often a key step in rebuilding credibility and trust towards CSOs among sceptical audiences.

09 Partnership building work for a civic space campaign will normally start by mobilising
 10 peers and allies who will have appeal for the existing CSO supporter group. Additionally, when considering making an appeal to sceptical middle groups, it's important to honestly acknowledge that the lead **CSO and/or existing allies may not be the best messengers!** In this case, bringing on board unusual allies is important, and can include religious leaders, journalists, sports people, celebrities, business leaders, and even politicians. The advice from Beautiful Trouble which we included in our [resource on strategic communications coalitions](#) is relevant in this case of a broader public target audience: **“if you're not uncomfortable, your coalition is too small”**⁴³.

43 Beautiful Trouble (2024) [Toolbox Principles](#)

Cases

Kenya

Campaigners were able to recruit **religious leaders, politicians who had a civil society background, as well as a range of people from the public and private sectors** who were at stake to be most affected by the proposed changes that would have resulted in a loss of employment and service provision in their regions. They also were able to get **support from within the executive branch of government**, e.g. the ministries of finance/treasury and health, who would also be directly affected by the proposed changes.

In addition, key messengers in the Kenyan case also came **from the large development CSOs** which work closely with governments and are at the heart of service provision in wedge issues such as health and social welfare. These are not unusual allies, but many have reported that organisations not directly publicly targeted in civic space attacks are often not aware how certain legal changes could also affect their funding and status. Once they gain this realisation, campaigners can then also recruit community groups/association, unions and religious movements.

Kyrgyzstan

In this case, campaigners reported that **having a “choir of arguments” creating pressure was key to their victory**. These included **business people** from across the key sectors of the economy talking about why shrinking civic space is also a problem for them. Further, **people within the executive** branches of government at various levels and even politicians in the parliament, came out in support of the campaign and coalition¹.

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

¹ See [campaign video showing their range of supporters](#) (In Russian - Turn on & adjust Closed Captions to see it translated into your language of choice).

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Action

Make partnership building a task in the campaign team from day one — In our experience, campaign teams have tended to focus their efforts on messages and content with the partnership work left for later and often being a last-minute rush, rather than a key pillar of the strategy. Given the core role that the rebuilding of trust plays in civic space

campaigns and the important role of a broad-based coalition in achieving that goal, we recommend having someone or a team (if you can afford it) working to bring partners on board from day one. See our [‘10 keys for mobilising strategic communications coalitions’](#) resource for strategic and practical advice on doing this work.



What you can get wrong

Over-relying on messengers — Campaigning to deliver change is a long-term endeavour entailing lots of hard work, and it’s important to remember that messengers are often there for you to do just one job, such as post online a few times, introduce you to people, or attend or host a few events. They don’t normally become part of the campaign team! This is also an issue in the policy advocacy arena with so-called ‘policy brokers’⁴⁴. For this reason, as one of the Kazakh campaigners we supported argued, you need to work on a “diverse coalitions of artists, influencers, NGO leaders, private sector and politicians” to ensure strength and sustainability.

Thinking that celebrities are always the best messengers — When the subject of campaign messengers comes up, the default answer from many is to get celebrities on board. To be clear, if you can get their support and they are effective in delivering the message you want, then this can work in creating attention and momentum. But often a noisy focus on a campaign with lots of media attention is not what is needed. For example, the backing of an influential academic with no public presence can be key to moving a policy process forward. So, it’s important to be tactical in planning to deploy partners and the type of support they can best offer at the right time to achieve defined advocacy goals.

Being unrealistic about working with social media influencers — in the early days of social media, people were excited by the promise of working with social media influencers to mobilise public support, avoiding the gatekeeping in the traditional media sector. With the growth of social media business, many important influencers have agents and it really requires a significant investment of time and money to get them on board for a social cause. You may be able to get a committed champion influencer to come on board for your campaign, and who would even be willing to make their own content for the campaign. However, our experiences regarding influencers has been that they are more risk-averse and financially-motivated. In the Kazakh case, influencers were willing to share campaign material, but not publicly state their support for the campaign or even share the campaign hashtag. This kind of risk aversion in protecting their brand is not so surprising in that environment, but the investment in the cause was significantly less than the campaigners were hoping for in bringing influencers on board.

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44 ICPA (2021) [Making Research Evidence Matter: A Policy Advocacy Guide](#)

Lesson 10

INVEST IN MESSAGE TESTING — DON'T RELY ONLY ON INSTINCTS!

Essence

As there's so much at stake in attitude change campaigning work, it's important to **invest in empirically testing what is triggered by new narratives and communications content** before sharing widely, rather than just trusting your instinct about what you think will work with middle audiences.

Insight

In When the goal of a campaign run by progressives is to change the attitudes of a more sceptical target audience, there is significant risk of getting it wrong or more worryingly, of even making the situation worse! If campaign messages and content trigger the so-called 'backfire effect'⁴⁵, this leads to the response of hardening of attitudes. This is a lesson grounded in **much first-hand experience of campaigners' gut reaction of what they think will work with middle audiences proving wrong in focus group message testing**. Testing is especially effective in identifying the elements that are NOT working or even backfiring. Based on this important feedback, campaigners can then make informed decisions on which campaign content to remove or adjust. On the more positive side, taking an iterative 'test and learn' approach helps in adjusting and finalising the messages and materials that are working and scale up from there to maximise impact⁴⁶.

So, as there's so much at stake, it is important to invest in testing to understand exactly what is working (or not) in messaging and content. One of the Kazakh partners sums up this approach well: "Data is convincing and even just the idea of not making assumptions is very important". There are many options for narrative testing to fit different needs and budgets — see [our resource for more on this](#).

45 ICPA (2018) [Reframing Migration Narratives Toolkit: Understanding The Power of Frames](#)

46 See our message testing resource for more on a 'test and learn' approach: ICPA (2023) [Message Testing Methods for Narrative Change](#).

Cases

Kazakhstan

The following were the stages of testing through the #Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen) campaign development and rollout period.

	Testing method	What was tested?	Stage of campaigning
1	Focus groups	The draft pitch, messages and early draft stories for the campaign were tested with groups from the target middle segments to see if the campaign concept works.	After initial planning but before investing in producing expensive content and videos.
2	Randomised Controlled Trial	The video materials for the campaign were tested to pick the winners, i.e. find the ones that did the most to shift attitudes positively	Before the campaign rollout. Use the results to design the rollout.
3	'Test and Learn' through the rollout	By monitoring performance and responses on social media in the early stages, campaigners worked out what was working and adjusted the messaging and materials to increase impact.	In the early stage (first month) of the campaign rollout

→ See the **Advocacy Cases Section 6** for more details and background on the cases.

Table 3 _ Testing stages for #Azamatbol (ICPA 2024)

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Action

Any testing is better than no testing — A wide range of material is commonly tested including pitches, top line narratives and messages, stories and protagonists, slogans and hashtags, visuals/memes, video material and website content. We have found it useful to plan testing at two stages in campaign development:

Concept level — Having identified a target audience/segment of the public and developed a messaging and pitching approach, and even some draft content, it is useful to see if the strategy is working before spending large amounts of money on content production.

Content level — This is the more traditional understanding of when to test, i.e. once images, video and campaign content have been developed and the aim is to identify which content and messaging works better.

But if you can't be so strategic for whatever reason, it is still important to remember that “any testing is better than no testing”⁴⁷, and we outline a range of methods we've used specifically [for testing for narrative change campaigning in a concise resource](#).



What you can get wrong

Assuming that testing is only for well-funded organisations with high capacity — This is somehow a widely held view, but in fact, there are many cheaper and lower capacity options available to get feedback on ideas before launching a campaign. To make testing more accessible and feasible for all types of CSOs, we have outlined the costs of methods and capacity required for different testing options in our [“Message Testing Methods for Narrative Change” resource](#).

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⁴⁷ Public Interest Research Centre (2017) [Framing Equality Toolbox](#)

PROACTIVE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS RESPONSES

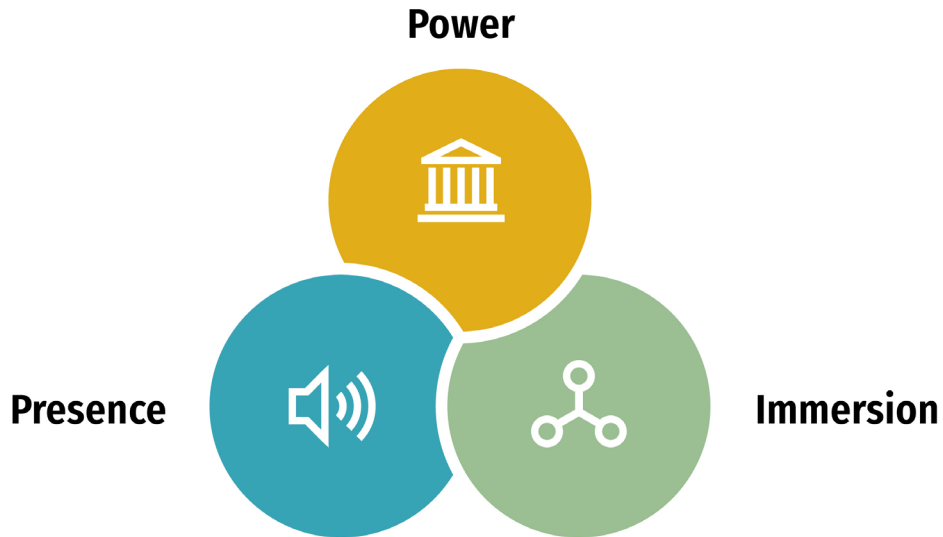
A key pillar of the narrative attacks on CSOs is focused on undermining trust in the sector; hence, for CSOs and their supporters to be effective in their response, they need to adopt a multi-pronged approach. This means both safeguarding existing positive public attitudes towards CSOs *and* more broadly **working to build broader public support for the sector and thereby, rebuild trust in the sector.**

Achieving this requires an ongoing and proactive communications/advocacy approach in tandem with specific efforts to counter defamatory and vilifying narrative attacks on targeted individuals and organisations. Many practitioners and authors already recognise this need to actively work on rebuilding trust as a key element of responses on attempts to shrink civic space⁴⁸. This goal of proactively safeguarding and rebuilding trust in the sector is at the heart of the civic space narrative change work we've supported in Kazakhstan (See case details in Section 6) and more recently, [in Germany](#).

Our approach to this proactive communications work is outlined in [our framework on strategic communications](#) with the **target of building presence of positive narratives as the attainable first level goal of campaigning**. Applied to civic space work, this means **working to build “surround sound, volume and velocity”**⁴⁹ of positive stories which illustrate the value and values of the civil society sector. The following diagram shows this strategic communications goal of **presence** as one of three key target levels for achieving lasting change, together with **immersion and power**. The table below synthesises the different foci of the three levels.

48 Ariadne (2016) [Challenging the Closing Space for Civil Society: A practical starting point for funders.](#); Israel Butler, Liberties (2021). [How to talk about civic space: a guide for progressive civil society facing smear campaigns](#); Civicus (2019) [Against the wave: Civil society responses to anti-rights groups](#); International Civil Society Centre & Just Labs (2019) [Civil Society Innovation and Populism in a Digital Era](#); Kapronczay and Kertesz, Global Dialogues (2018) [Dropping the defence: hopeful stories fight stigma in Hungary](#); Lifeline (2022). [Reanimating civil society: A Lifeline guide for Narrative Change](#).

49 [Frank Sharry, America's Voice](#)



Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → build consistent voice and visibility in media spaces → getting the message “out”/“known” → Dissemination → building surround sound, volume and velocity
Immersion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → design engaging interventions to socialise narratives in interactions, relationships and everyday practice → getting the message “in”/“owned” → chances to discover/engage with the narrative → Shifting norms/behavioural expectations
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → making the political space or building the support to make change → changing the rules of policy/law

Figure 10 _ Strategic Communications Levels (as defined by ICPA)

Based on this strategic communications framework, the logic of our approach to civic space narrative change work is based on the idea of the Overton window⁵⁰, i.e. that **the public debate sets the boundary of acceptable policy and legal choices**. For example, it is evident that even in less democratic states, authoritarians see the need for an extreme ‘foreign agent’ narrative and accusations of corruption as justification

50 Makinac Center for Public Policy (2024) [The Overton Window](#)

for extreme legal measures and vilification. It therefore, follows that building broader public support and trust in the sector would mean far less motivation, momentum or political space to shrink civic space.

In tactical and practical terms, our work supports advocates to build, test and rollout narrative change strategies which target the broader public of ‘movable middle’ audiences in order to (re)build support for civil society. Our empirically-tested approach has time and time again demonstrated that **storytelling based on values-based narratives does engage and shift key attitudes of the middle audiences on civic space issues**, even in more challenging environments. Specifically, in Kazakhstan, campaign material that told positive stories of CSO work addressing common challenges and appealing to values of community, solidarity and charity moved middle audiences by three times the average in the positive on the key attitudes that need to be strengthened to rebuild trust in the sector (see Advocacy Cases in Section 6 for more detail, [resource on message testing methods](#), and our [evaluation framework for measuring effectiveness of narrative change efforts](#)).

While this result shows promise, obviously a longer-term change is needed in order for these more positive and trusting attitudes to become much more widely held, and ultimately, become the norm. **A strategic communications framework supports planning and conducting this multi-pronged and staged proactive work to achieve the bigger picture goal of rebuilding trust and safeguarding the sector to play its legitimate role.** In practical terms, building presence of such narratives entails considerable investment of time, money and effort and would require multiple actors or a movement-based approach to create the level of presence and saturation of narratives needed to tip the balance of the debate — that is the need, challenge and opportunity which strategic communications thinking can support.

ADVOCACY CASES COUNTERING CIVIC SPACE RESTRICTIONS

This guide is built primarily on the analysis and lessons drawn from advocacy campaigning practice with narrative change used to varying degrees as an instrument to push back on government-led initiatives to shrink civic space in various countries. This section provides **the key background information on the case studies that serve as the foundation for the advice we offer**. As the Kazakh case is centred around a narrative change approach, this is the most in-depth case study we document.

The knowledge and insights in this resource were developed in various ways: from directly supporting narrative change campaigning over a six-year period (Kazakhstan), conducting primary research and interviews with campaign leaders who led successful campaigns to overturn proposals to shrink space in their countries (Kenya and Kyrgyzstan); and analysis of shrinking civic space campaign cases written up by others. Not surprisingly, the greatest depth and insight comes from our hands-on work in Kazakhstan, followed by the primary research we conducted on Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, and finally, a more general framing comes from the cases shared in secondary sources. See the figure below for a synopsis:



Figure 11 _ The case practice that is the foundation of the resource

Kazakhstan

Based on six years of narrative change work

Country	Kazakhstan
Civic space attack	Burdensome reporting; restrictions on access to foreign funding and partners; aggressive court challenges to suspend CSO operations; restrictions on online freedom of speech
Timeline	2017 to 2022
Campaign Coalition	Led by MediaNet ⁵¹ , with support of local partners PaperLab ⁵² and Soros Foundation Kazakhstan ⁵³ (SFK); local CSO partners as protagonists; ICPA in the role of capacity builders and mentors
Funding Partners	Eurasia Program of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) ⁵⁴ and Soros Foundation Kazakhstan ⁵⁵ .
Result	The campaign proved effective in shifting attitudes of target middle segments by +6% in the positive direction. The standard benchmark is +2% for randomised controlled trials.

A

#Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen)⁵⁶ is a campaign designed to rebuild trust and positivity around the work of CSOs in Kazakhstan among sceptical middle groups who have been exposed to years of messaging by the government designed to undermine that trust. Azamat is a word that captures an idea of community person of good character or good citizen.

⁵¹ [Medianet Website](#)

⁵² [Paperlab Website](#)

⁵³ [Soros Foundation Kazakhstan Website](#)

⁵⁴ [Open Society Foundations, Eurasia programme Website](#)

⁵⁵ [Soros Foundation Kazakhstan Website](#)

⁵⁶ MediaNet (2021) [Azamatbol Campaign Facebook Page](#)

The slow squeeze on civic space has been ongoing since 2015, starting with a heavily burdensome reporting procedure that was also very aggressively policed, with organisations not fulfilling the requirements taken to court and threatened with suspension. In addition, a change in taxation laws restricted foreign funding and the possibility of working with foreign partners⁵⁷. The **CSO coalition decided to experiment with re-balancing public opinion on CSOs in a more favourable direction, so it would become more challenging for the authorities to continue their steps to close civic space.**

Messaging and materials

Building on new segmentation research developed in the opening stage of the project⁵⁸, MediaNet decided to target three middle segments as follows:

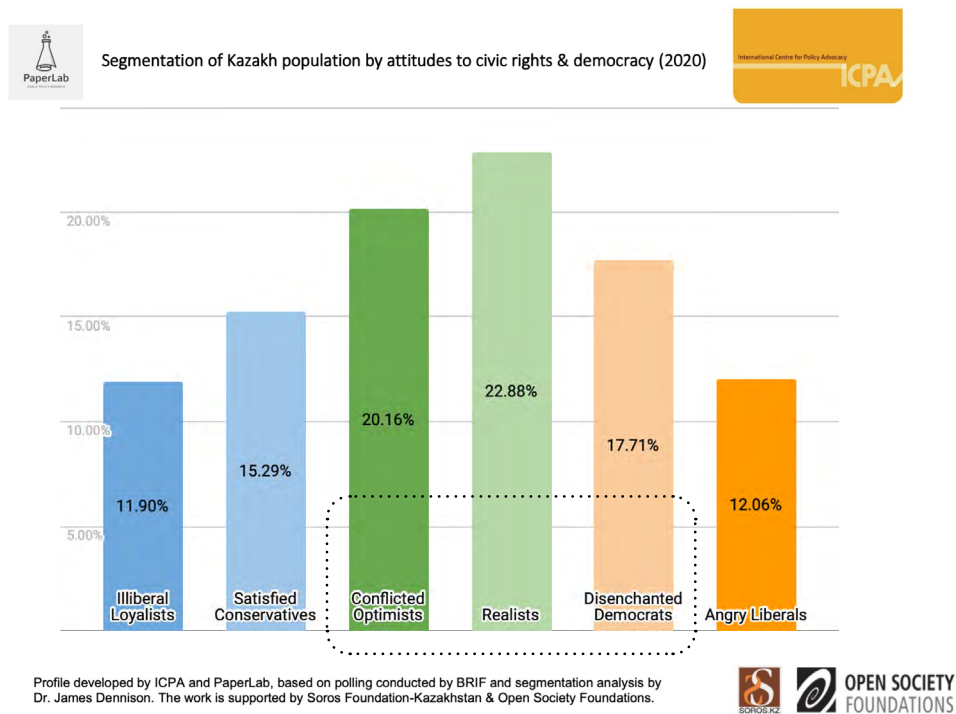


Figure 12 _ Three target middle segments for the #Azamatbol campaign

57 ICNL (2024) [Civic Freedom Monitor: Kazakhstan](#)

58 See [an overview of all six segments](#) from this research

We also used a frames map of the main narrative lines in the debate on CSOs, democracy, civic rights and participation, which led to identifying possible openings to message on — especially around independent community action and charity⁵⁹. See Lesson 2 for more on the set of positive frames and also see the [overview of the complete frames map in the link](#).

The focus of the campaign was on communicating the shared values of the civil society sector with the target segments by building stories that appealed to the following values:

ОБРАЩЕНИЕ К ЦЕННОСТЯМ

- 1 Уважение, забота о старших и детях**
Respect, care for elders and children
- 2 Сообщество (благотворительность, волонтерство, взаимопомощь, гуманизм, социальная справедливость)**
Community (charity, volunteering, mutual assistance, humanism, social justice)
- 3 Традиции (почитание предков, простота, Наурыз)**
Traditions (ancestral honor, simplicity, Nauryz)
- 4 Гордость на уровне сообществ (стремление к успеху, амбиции)**
Community pride (striving for success, ambition)
- 5 Уважение и любовь к маме**
Respect and love for mother

Figure 13 _ Value appeals underpinning the #Azamatbol campaign

Example campaign materials

Four CSO leaders were approached to be protagonists and they shared their stories in the campaign. An example story that worked very well centred on an environmentalist called Assel, who works to protect seal populations in the Caspian Sea. At the core of the story is her strong and emotional connection to the seals she protects and her dismay at seeing their numbers fall from 2015. She also shares about the strength of her organisation and those who work with her to find a solution to protect the seals and the local Caspian Sea environment, with an appeal to shared action of local partners as the key to success. Her story is also set in a family background, as she works with her father

⁵⁹ This frames map was developed based on an internet scraping approach commissioned from [Bakamo Social](#).

and warmly shares many experiences with the seal population she has shared with her father from a young age. Telling what could otherwise be a dry scientific issue through a personal lens and showing that local responses are the solution brings out an authentic story that really moved opinion of the middle.



Figure 14 _ Example of value-driven CSO story shared (See the [Assel video](#))

A second story that also worked well was from a CSO leader called Aizada, who supports children with disabilities (See the [Aizada video](#)).

The following are two examples of memetic material produced for the campaign and shared on social media:

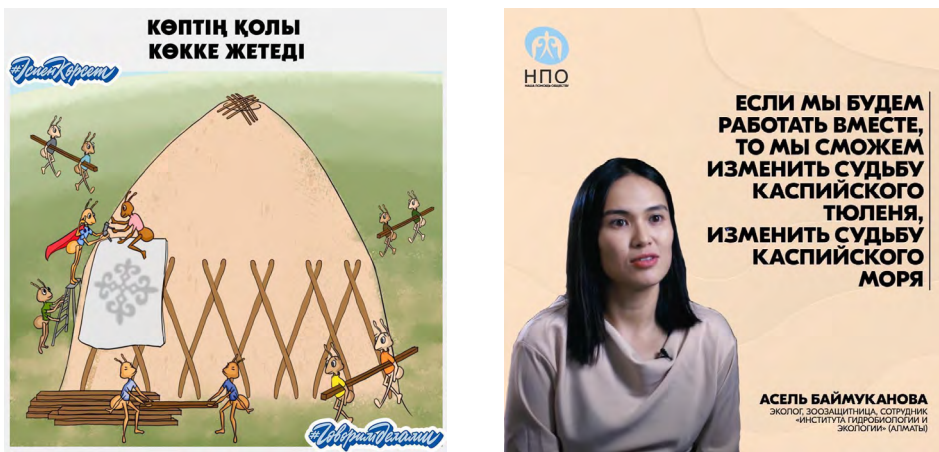


Figure 15 _ Example of campaign visuals over two rounds of the campaign

First picture: The idea of the yurt appeals to a very warm traditional idea of community and independent community action in Kazakhstan. The choice of the ant (which has a positive connotation) reinforces the idea of an active community with outsized strength. The copy is a well-known local phrase in Kazakh that means lots of hands reach heaven, similar to the phrase ‘many hands make light work’, but even more hopeful!

Second picture: Portraits with key quotes for the four protagonists were also used. This is the one for Assel and the quote says the following:

“Who else but us will protect Caspian seals? The support of concerned people, partner organisations and the state gives the team of the Institute of Hydrobiology and Ecology confidence that together we will save the Caspian Seal”.

Testing, evaluation and results

The campaign was launched on social media and run mostly on Facebook and Instagram to reach the target segments. In addition, the campaign worked with online influencers to further share the content and access middle groups, e.g. an Instagram influencer around motherhood. In addition, media outlets covered the campaign in more mainstream press.

Then, through the various stages of development we navigated the following testing and validation process:



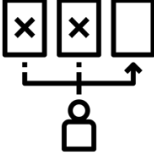
Testing campaign concept	Testing campaign content	Evaluating through campaign rollout
<p data-bbox="327 1234 459 1258">Focus Groups</p> 	<p data-bbox="589 1234 862 1258">Randomised Controlled Trial</p> 	<p data-bbox="942 1234 1177 1258">Test and learn approach</p> 

Figure 16 _ Testing and Evaluation Design for the #Azamatbol (#GoodCitizen) campaign

→ See the **case box in Lesson 10** for more on the strategy and [our message testing resource](#) for an introduction to each of the methods.

After two rounds of campaigning, there was significant reach to middle groups and high levels of engagement with the material. The most significant result was measured by running a randomised controlled trial on a group of 1,000 people where a test group saw a campaign video and answered survey questions on CSOs, and a control group who saw a general public information video and answered the same set of questions⁶⁰. Having segmented the results, it showed that the campaign material produced a +6% positive attitude shift among middle groups (standard benchmark is +2% for such tests). These results show the potential to go to scale with positively focused CSO stories based on shared values that demonstrate the contribution and value of the sector to the public.

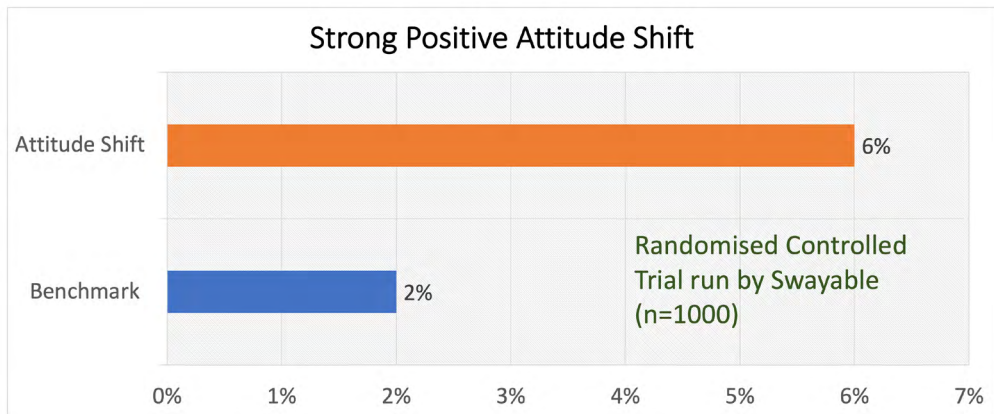


Figure 17 _The materials produced a 6% positive attitude shift on CSOs in the movable middle

⁶⁰ The test was commissioned from [Swayable](#).

Kenya

Based on primary research

When we began work in this field in 2017, we asked experts for advice on where CSO coalitions had been successful in pushing back on government attempts to shrink civic space. As many mentioned Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, we chose to research these as case studies to learn from. It is worth noting that the pressure on civil society in both these countries has continued since these hard-won victories.

Country	Kenya
Civic space attack	Restriction on foreign funding, burdensome reporting, active deregistering of CSOs for non-compliance, increased surveillance powers and public vilification of CSOs
Timeline	2013 to 2017
CSO response	Multi-pronged public, international, litigation and parliamentary campaign to defeat the initial proposal, and building of a CSO platform
Result	The proposal was first defeated in parliament in 2013 and continual monitoring and push back of new initiatives to reintroduce similar amendments continued to 2017.

B

Over the five-year period in focus for this case study (2013–2017), the Kenyan government of the time made multiple attempts to shrink civic space from restricting the use of foreign funding to burdensome reporting laws, to actively deregistering CSOs for non-compliance to a public campaign vilifying CSO leaders as ‘enemies of the state’. This was done during a period of legislative chaos when amendments to a law on public benefits organisations was debated back and forth, and at the same time a very aggressive executive body (NGO Coordination Board) went ahead with these actions to shrink space.

A broad 50-member CSO coalition, led by the Civil Society Reference Group⁶¹, used a

⁶¹ [Civil Society Reference Group Facebook Page](#)

wide variety of tools over that time to push back on these initiatives including public/ social media campaigns, street protests, strategic litigation, and building opposition support in the parliament and among international organisations. The arguments made centred primarily around the positive contribution of the sector and its leaders to development, social services and the economy, as well as the immediate loss of essential services (such as health care), development funding and standing in the international community if the laws were passed⁶².



Figure 18 _ Example of online meetings with CSO leaders who were attacked as ‘Enemies of the State’⁶³

As shown in Figure 18, an example of the reframing done in the campaign was to hold online meetings with CSO leaders who had been vilified by the government as ‘enemies of the state’. In these meetings, the CSO leaders took questions and talked about their own lives, their families and communities and what motivated them to become part of the civil society sector and why the sector is important to their community.

To develop this case, we conducted an analysis of key documents and interviewed the Executive Secretary of the Constitution and Reforms Education Consortium⁶⁴ (CRECO) in Kenya, who was a key player in the Civil Society Reference Group (CSRG) coalition.

Although this push back was successful, it is worth noting that pressure on civic space and rights continues to the present day⁶⁵.

62 Heinrich Boll Stiftung (2016) [Under Pressure: Shrinking Space for Civil Society in Africa](#); Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (2019) – [Preventing Civic Space Restrictions: An Exploratory Study Of Successful Resistance Against NGO Laws](#).

63 Enemy of the State KE blog (2013) [Is Gladwell Otieno an Enemy of the State?](#)

64 [Constitution and Reforms Education Consortium \(CRECO\) Homepage](#)

65 Civicus (2022) [Country Brief Kenya: Overview of recent restrictions to civic freedoms ahead of 2022 elections](#)

Kyrgyzstan

Based on primary research

Country	Kyrgyzstan
Civic space attack	A Foreign Agent's law similar to the Russian model
Timeline	2013 to 2016
CSO response	Public, international and parliamentary campaign to defeat the proposal
Result	The proposal was defeated in Parliament in 2017.

B

In 2013, the Kyrgyz government tabled a Russian-inspired 'Foreign Agents' law and this began a three-year campaign by a CSO coalition until the proposed law was finally defeated in 2016⁶⁶. The campaign combined public campaigning, mobilisation and pressure from international organisations (e.g. OHCHR/UN, OSCE, EU), as well as working closely with parliamentary opposition to defeat the proposal.

Kyrgyz campaigners reframed the debate away from foreign agents to the significant financial contribution of the sector to the overall economy and also its vital role in service provision of health care (See Figure 19 showing how this data was presented). They also built an argument around the risks of the country losing its reputation as an "island of democracy" in the Central Asian region, should civil society be restricted⁶⁷.

66 Civicus (2016) [Resilience of Kyrgyzstan CSOs pays off as parliament throws out 'foreign agents' Bill](#); Guardian (2016) [Disputed 'foreign agent' law shot down by Kyrgyzstan's parliament](#)

67 Peace Research Institute Frankfurt (2019) [Preventing Civic Space Restrictions: An Exploratory Study Of Successful Resistance Against NGO Laws](#).

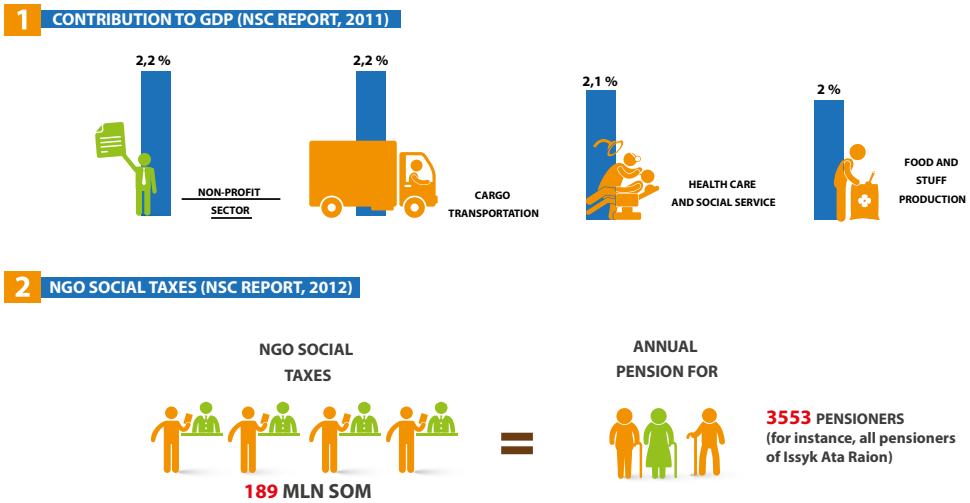


Figure 19 _ An example of the striking facts used in the campaign to talk about the contribution of the sector

To pull the whole argument together for parliamentarians, campaigners put together a video showing how embedded CSOs are in supporting citizens and the state⁶⁸. The video also shows the extensive broad-based coalition who supported them or the “choir of arguments” as they called it, including CSO leaders, civil servants and MPs.



Figure 20 _ Example argument made in the video: The CSO sector employs 15,000 people, which is the same as the whole mining sector in Kyrgyzstan

68 See [campaign video showing their range of supporters](#) (In Russian - Turn on & adjust Closed Captions to see it translated into your language of choice).

To gain insights into the campaign, we completed an analysis of documents and interviewed the director of the Civic Participation Fund, who was a leader in this coalition.

It is worth noting that as we finalise this work, that the situation in Kyrgyzstan has changed for the worse and a foreign agents law very similar to the one discussed in the case study was passed in April 2024⁶⁹.

Secondary sources on cases

To widen the evidence base for this resource, we drew on 30 case studies of various initiatives across the globe designed to preserve civic space which were compiled from two main sources:

- 16 long case studies from World Movement for Democracy (2021) *Civic Space Case Studies*⁷⁰;
- 14 short case studies from LifeLine (2020) *Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations*⁷¹.

These cases covered work done in Europe, Asia, Africa, Russia and the Caucasus, Middle East, Central and South America. We conducted the case study analysis mainly to confirm the similarity of patterns of attacks and responses around the globe, with two cases, from Hungary and Egypt, also used in the lessons section as illustration.

69 Eurasia.net (2023) [Kyrgyzstan plows ahead with foreign agent law, ignores foreign critics](#); IPHR (2023) [Kyrgyzstan: Reject repressive Russian-style draft law on non-profit organisations](#); The Diplomat (2024) [Kyrgyzstan Adopts Law Targeting Foreign-Funded NGOs](#)

70 World Movement for Democracy (2021) [Civic Space Case Studies](#)

71 LifeLine (2020) [Advocacy in restricted spaces: a toolkit for civil society organisations](#).

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About the resource and project

The [International Centre for Policy Advocacy](#) (ICPA) develops and supports advocacy initiatives designed to promote and safeguard democratic principles and open society values. We are an advocacy support organisation based in Berlin and working in Germany and internationally to provide capacity development, mentoring support and practical resources in the areas of policy advocacy, strategic communications and narrative change.

The Broadening Civic space narratives in Kazakhstan project was a capacity building and campaign development programme that will be implemented over a 6-year period (2018 to 2023). The project aimed to build the capacity of a network of NGO actors in Kazakhstan to broaden the public narrative on NGOs and thereby, contribute to slowing down the tabling and implementation of legal measures which seek to constrain NGO participation and action even further. The project included the Civic Space Narratives Lab which provided direct support to campaigning efforts, an evaluation and outreach component and also the development of pedagogical tools, of which this is the most extensive. The project was supported by the [Soros Foundation Kazakstan](#) and also the Eurasia Programme of the [Open Society Foundations](#).

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