

July 6, 2023

Interview with Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla

Citation:

"Interview with Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla", July 6, 2023, Wilson Center Digital Archive, <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/301095>

Summary:

The interview with Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla explores his journey into nuclear disarmament and advocacy, beginning with a chance involvement in the field during 2021. He discusses the importance of nuclear justice, particularly for Kazakhstan, a nation historically affected by nuclear testing, and emphasizes youth involvement and regional collaboration. Yerdaulet critiques global civil society and organizations like ICAN for Western dominance, advocating for a more inclusive and localized approach. He remains optimistic about the future of Kazakh civil society in addressing nuclear issues but expresses concern about global disarmament challenges and evolving threats such as AI weaponization. This document summary was generated by an artificial intelligence language model and was reviewed by a Wilson Center staff member.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY)

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English

Michal Onderco: I think the best way to start is with a very general question. How did you become interested in the topic of nuclear weapons and nuclear risk? And what is your background and why did you choose to be active in civil society?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Okay, so for the first time, I entered the field of nuclear... everything related to nuclear back in 2021. It was still pandemic. And it was approximately the end of May, the beginning of June. So I stock up on a youth branch of the CTBTO, and I joined it. But to be honest, it was just an accident because a friend of mine, he is originally from Kyrgyzstan, but now he's based in Berlin, and we were talking about different youth organizations and their objectives. And so he shared me with that opportunity. And I just discovered it. And I could, after a month, join the Citizen Journalism Academy. It was a series of workshops on how to write and publish about nuclear related topics. And after that, during my internship at German Political Foundation, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, I could organize the first summer school on proliferation and disarmament in Astana for 50 young people, with scholars diplomats and beyond. My background back then, I was still a young person. I'm still.

Michal Onderco: You're still young.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. But back then I was more interested in human rights, education and climate. And it was actually a new field for me. And I didn't have, like, a personal affiliation to this topic. Like, I'm not originally from the region or city or we don't have really close relatives, you know. Now I have relatives from that region area. And yeah, since then I continue to work in this field. But actually I joined the civil society back in my high school years. I was 18, so I did a lot of stuff. First I just attended different educational opportunities to know better about my rights, people's rights. And then I started to observe independently the elections, presidential, parliamentary ones. But it's quite unsafe to do human rights in Kazakh regime. And that's why I decided to, let's say, focus more on climate politics. But also there is some, let's say, obstacles, because there is a lot of lobbying, large national corporations and international corporations. So I think I eventually came to the nuclear weapons, nuclear non-proliferation, disarmament field because I saw that [...]our government is doing a lot and our ancestors, Nevada-Semei movement n did a lot in this field in the 90s. But then there was like a gap in this field. So there is not that many actors. So I did I saw a lot of potential and a lot of meaning in this, in that direction. And since then, I did a lot of stuff in this direction.

Michal Onderco: I'm going to ask more about the Kazakhstan STOP initiative in the second. But before we before we get there, maybe a more general question: when you look at the world today, how do you view the role of nuclear weapons in the world? Do you view them as a stabilising or destabilising factor?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So currently I'm living through a quite interesting period when my political perspectives are transforming. So, as I said my first interactions with everything related to nukes was more from disarmament (and) nonproliferation perspective. But to better understand the context you also have to be familiar with deterrence theories, and opinions of nuclear armed states, or those while planning to do so. So now I'm also exploring their perspectives. So but I still view the nukes and all this modernization, in China, Russia, in the US and beyond, as really ... negative developments. As a country with a legacy and as a nation that suffered from nuclear weapons for 40 years, actually, those who lived through this nuclear war,

and we experienced it on ourselves and seeing a renaissance in this world of nuclear weapons, of course, it's retraumatizing. And yeah, briefly speaking, my perceptions about this nuclear world is more negative than positive, but now I'm also trying to maybe shift my paradigms about my opinions about this and maybe develop in the direction that we also have to have these really hard talks and conversations with people who are deciding over these nuclear weapons, let's say in our northern neighbor Russian Federation, to engage more with their stakeholders and understand their psychology. Yeah. So this is what I'm living through.

Michal Onderco: And when you look at the civil society what do you think should be the main focus of civil society? Should it be working towards abolishing nuclear weapons? Should it be to work on practical steps towards risk reduction? Should it be focused on the survivors of nuclear testing and the victims? Where, in your view, should be the focus of civil society?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Like global community?

Michal Onderco: Yes.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Speaking about this international cohort of activists, lobbyists, campaigners, scholars and more, I believe each organization, each individual... let's say a couple of issues they focus on. Personally, on how I see my role, for example, and I think a lot of Kazakh young changemakers, they are also focusing on the victim assistance, environmental remediation, Article VI and VII of the TPNW, advocating for the rights and conditions of nuclear survivors in all generations in Kazakhstan and worldwide. Also I think they're advocating for more inclusive policymaking, inclusion of youth. But I think there is also should be a bigger interest in nuclear risk reduction, even though it's a bit of a different field, it's still interconnected with what we are doing for so long. I believe there is already somehow you know, allocated interest areas within civil society members. And for example, this and a couple of upcoming events on the 29 August and we as a local Kazakh partners, we are ... obviously if it's going to happen in Astana, then we should collaborate with international partners, with our guests. But what I see so far is quite interesting. Even though all of these organizations, civil society members, they advocate for a common goal, for nuclear justice, the approaches they use, and (...) how genuine they are - these levels are really, really different. So I believe another major issue that is really neglected in disarmament and non-proliferation sector, is nuclear justice, it is comparatively a new notion. Right? And our youth initiative, it's in its name, it's the first Central Asian youth led initiative for nuclear justice, Step organization for peace, STOP for short. And I believe we kind of found our own niche already. And we understand why we are doing that, and we have legitimacy to do so. But to be honest, I believe we should also go a bit beyond that.

Michal Onderco: What do you understand under nuclear justice?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Nuclear justice? So there is a set of different definitions of this notion. Right? And for example, nuclear survivors, they could have different description of it ,and those who are scholars and so on and so on. For me, I think, nuclear justice is just one of those (notions) of nuclear affected nations. It consists of several types of justice, redistributive justice and so on. So it's a complex type of justice that involves the rights, the conditions, the historical justice towards the people who are affected in any way from nuclear weapons. And the main, let's say, objective for nuclear justice advocates should be probably focusing first on victims,

giving them the space and actually bringing their needs, desires and perspectives to the table and deciding what they really need. (...) Different communities of nuclear affected communities, they have different perspectives and different experiences. So I wouldn't give one, let's say, universal definition of nuclear justice. But what I understand, under the TPNW, the nuclear justice or nuclear survivors, nuclear victim definitions are quite limited. So this term is an emerging one, and it's a living definition that that will be, I think, changed a lot, even especially in the upcoming months, prior to the third MSP to the TPNW.

Michal Onderco: There is now a lot of change happening in the nuclear disarmament space. And one of the motivations for these changes is, of course, things that didn't happen in the past, or sort of the failures of the past. In your view, what's the biggest failure in the nuclear space nuclear field since the end of the Cold War?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So I think first and foremost, after the Cold War, our ancestors, and I'm talking about the whole humankind, there was some kind of pause on their active involvement in these issues. Like, "okay, we're done now let's take a break." And this break led to what we're seeing or witnessing today. Right? So I think this neglectedness to this important issue, a set of issues, this is the first fail. I don't want to use words like failure because there were still some actors and communities, organizations that could continue their mission to advocate for the abolishment of nuclear weapons, or at least minimizing the risks. But in general, I think from the international community, and all these decision-making people, there was less interest. But I believe there were also a lot of achievements. We can talk about it later. But in general, I think this is the biggest failure that led to what we're having now. But besides that, I believe one of the issues that I see as a young person entering this field and trying to have this historically justified space, is that there is actually not always a consensus among nuclear disarmament advocates, on the like, as I said, there is some kind of a competition between different players. And I understand why, like, everyone tries to survive, there is less funding, there is less interest, and there are a lot of obstacles and everyone is trying to be pushy and have the contribution. But there is kind of lack of intergenerational dialogue or within civil society. Like for example, I know that there is like evolution towards network and there is for example, ICAN and before that there were different international regional week, uh forums and uh coalitions. But even they have within the disarmament community these misunderstandings, competition and so on. And so for me I think this is another failure because it really it slows down the process and it creates another set of challenges that we don't need. We already have a lot of pressure from nuclear armed states, from the lobbyists and so on. And we actually should support each other and advocate for the common cause, as I said. But yeah, this is really I don't know, problematic aspect of the community.

Michal Onderco: And you said you... I'll go to achievements later. Who do you think is to blame for this? You said that one of the biggest problems was that there was these people who stopped being interested in nuclear weapons. Who do you think is to blame for that? And was there anything that civil society could have done differently?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: I understand that the blame should be attributed and allocated among all stakeholders who are involved in that process, and not only in civil society. But I believe as a human race, we were just tired and traumatized by that nuclear arms race. And for example,

let's talk specifically about Kazakh civil society, the anti-nuclear movement. So recently we also discussed that they did this, the very first global anti-nuclear movement. They did it successfully. They closed the the largest nuclear weapons test site in Kazakhstan and also advocated for the brothers and sisters and friends in other parts of the world. And but afterward, as like from 90s, they kind of disappeared, even though they still have these legal institutions. But they're not doing much, for example, for the consequences of nuclear weapons testing and other activities related to nuclear weapons. So I think there is some kind of... not blame, but maybe... I don't know how to articulate it, but there was also an expectation probably that they will continue this journey. But I think we should all be grateful for everything that they have done. And there was this challenge with giving it to the next generation of changemakers. But what's important to understand that for example, in the context of Kazakhstan, a lot of civil society members who were involved in disarmament affairs they are themselves from the nuclear effective communities for that's right. For them to work and continue to work on this is really traumatizing. Retraumatizing it's really energy, time consuming beyond the standard duties and obligations. And yeah, we are also experiencing this now, like nuclear justice and working especially from the civil society sector is really challenging considering all these problems. But I believe civil society could, I think, build bridges for the next generation that will continue the mission on the paved pathway. And this is the first thing. And secondly I believe we shouldn't stop at least discussing having this discourse public conversations about this topic, because there was a big window of opportunities in the 90s, for example, in Kazakhstan, in Central Asia. And it's less free now. But then eventually this topic became a taboo one due to a different set of factors. And we should also understand the internal political conditions or why, for example, in Kazakhstan, civil society stopped to talk and do anything about that.

Michal Onderco: Why is that?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Because it's important to understand the context that Semei city and the Abai region, historically, it was always a politically active region with a lot of prominent scholars, politicians and many, many people. And the civil society was also quite, quite successful, from 1920s even and before. But the, let's say, some kind of difficult relationships between the former administration, the first president and the city and its civil society led to the, let's say, deterioration and the killing of the region in the way that Semei was united with Eastern Kazakhstan Region. So they lost their autonomy in that sense. They didn't have their representatives on the national level in Parliament. And also they didn't have the separate city council, city administration, regional administration. They didn't have funding just for infrastructure. So when we visited recently the city and neighborhoods there, it's really, really sad. [So that's the context]. Of course, all these factors they accumulated and led to what we have now, but it's changing now, since now they have again this autonomy. And a lot of things are happening since 2021, 22, in Kazakh civil society specifically. Yeah. So we have this, while nuclear armed states and governments they have their own renaissance in Kazakhstan we have the renaissance of civil society. Also involving Kazakh youth, new players, and, yeah, a lot of things will be changing, transforming. So actually there is a lot of hope. So maybe these failures, these gaps will be covered by us in really turbo mode. So because we lost a lot of opportunities in 1900s.

Michal Onderco: And you mentioned that there are there were successes. So what were these successes?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: I believe in general that we used to have some kind of, on the world level, understanding that nuclear weapons and their further development is detrimental to all of us. And there was, I think, certain obligations that could work for nuclear armed states. And there were more and more support from international community towards people affected from nuclear weapons, nuclear testing, uranium mining and beyond. So these were successes. There is like some kind of understanding that all these previous generations of civil society actors did and they achieved that. Considering the recent developments, I believe the adoption, just the existence of the nuclear ban treaty TPNW is also a huge success for this civil society, even many, many people criticize it. And I mean, I usually, of course, hear approval of it. That is really important international treaty. But it's not working. But we should also understand that this very treaty, it was only a couple of years since it was in power.

Michal Onderco: Yeah.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: And threw it into force. And but still it's developing fast. We have a lot of states parties and where like, expecting to have more member states to join it. And I believe this is a huge success. Now, we have at least some legitimate document that we can refer to and, let's say, call for reparations and other kind of nuclear justice from those governments who conducted all these international crimes. And, yeah this is another success that I would like mention. I think lastly, I think just the fact of perseverance and continuing working in that field, even. It's really challenging at the mental and it affects you, your community and so on. But besides that, a lot of people are still working a lot, still doing a great impact in this area. So I think it's still a success because otherwise we wouldn't be at the same level that we have now without their mission, their dedication.

Michal Onderco: I want to now move on to another part of the interview, and I want to ask something about your organization. So you are part of the Kazakh Steepe Youth Network. Can you tell us something more about the organization and maybe what do you do? And how does your organization act on the ground?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So I do briefly spoke that we were established and co-founded last year just before the second meeting of state parties to the Second Avenue. So they were...how many? Three... Six of us. In the beginning. Uh, but it's important to understand that we as Kazakh young leaders in proliferation. We started our journeys way before. So I think the initiator of this step, organization for peace, Aigerim Seitenova. She's the third-generation nuclear survivor from the Semei region, and she's a scholar and also expert in nuclear justice. So it was her initiative to unite and build this kind of coalition before the second MSP, because we were doing something about decolonizing nuclear fields, about peace education, about nuclear security, safety, individually, or [...] or I know sometimes to get some during all these years, since 2021, 22. But for example, she started her journey a bit earlier and then I joined her and then other guys joined us after those summer schools that I could organize in Astana City. And yeah, we already have had this like a core team. And we received support from certain organizations. And we decided to establish it. We didn't have certain structure. We tried to adhere to horizontal leadership model. And yeah, we just made it to the Nuclear Weapons Ban

Treaty conference and organized our first side event. And it was something in the sense that, all these conversations for a long period, they happened about us without us. Of course, there were always representatives of Kazakhstan, from civil society, from nuclear communities, but in really limited capacity, let's say a couple of people. And now for the first time, it was like a boom, like five people, seven people, and they're independent. And it was a bit, I think, shocking for all other attendees for that conference and also our diplomats and other policy makers that, 'oh, there's actually a lot of people, they are doing really cool stuff, important stuff, so we should collaborate with them more.' So afterward, after this conference, we didn't stop. We try to continue building our capacity. So I think I already shared with you about our first ever study tour [for people coming to Kazakhstan] with our colleagues from Germany, ICAN International (International Coalition to Abolish Nuclear Weapons) and TPNW, and also other civil society organizations. This kind of advanced projects didn't happen for a long time, and it was a huge success because in just a week we could visit three cities: the capital city Astana, Semei and former capital Almaty. And we met really diverse and really wide range of stakeholders, starting from diplomats and nuclear affected communities to environmentalists and to young people in different capacities. And yeah, it was super intense and it was really important and hard project. And after right after it, we saw othe new developments like there is also an emerging new organization with grassroot organization in Semei city, Polygon 21. It's an NGO with entrepreneurs and nuclear affected communities from the Abai region. Most of them are survivors in different generations. And yeah, now they already could meet, for example, five ministers. But all of them changed in the last two years. I mean, the people making the decisions, but they were aiming to create this governmental committee and join all these policymaking processes. But they couldn't do so. And right after our study tour, their leaders started to have a new round of meetings and negotiations. So our Kazakh government was like, 'okay, let's work, let's continue.'

Michal Onderco: No, they didn't take them seriously.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. Uh, but they are really serious. They are even strong because they are doing all of these work without, I don't know, access to international resources and tools. Are you quite understand that for example, different civil society organizations in Japan, in the US and the EU and beyond, they are more privileged to be closer and have access to all these opportunities, information, thinktanks and all these decision-making bodies. And while people in Semei they are just not informed about that. They think that nothing is happening. And when we came with this international German delegation they were just surprised. Of course they always visited, they were always welcoming different delegations from Japan and beyond, but they are way more skeptical and realists in that sense. And I laugh about that, and I was thankful that we could contribute to their work as well. And we're still in close touch because even though study tour has finished, it was successful. We learned a lot, especially our colleagues from Germany. We are now continuing doing different projects, personally I have been facilitating a couple of them, namely one medical research review, one article and I think one art exhibition. So each participant of our trip they're working on the individual and group projects in different capacities. Yeah we're still working on it and gonna continue this until the second MSP. Beyond that. Like me, we're also having another project especially on environmental and public health conditions in Semei city that we were about to start with my

colleague [name of person]. Also beyond that, we are planning to organize another set of events in Berlin with our MFA. So you see, a lot of things are happening and it's only on our side. I'm not talking about other civil society organizations. So there is a lot of, a lot of activities currently because our government is presiding over NPT, TPNW, NSG if I'm not mistaken, and a lot of things are happening and there is like a new wave of changes in civil society of Kazakhstan since 2021 and beyond.

Michal Onderco: And you mentioned many of these Kazakh NGOs that you work with. If you look globally or internationally, who are the most important partners for your work?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So there is a lot of partners and there is a lot of organizations like think tanks, civil societies and governments that want to collaborate with us. It was addressed during the second MSP in New York, and we made all these contacts from around the world. I believe first and foremost, we try to prioritize it in our advocacy and work. We try to build interregional inter nuclear affected communities forums and solidarity movements first. So our important partners, the Marshall Islands use namely the Marshallese Educational Initiative. I believe indigenous peoples in North America and South America, from French Polynesia, from Kiribati, also from Algeria and basically all nuclear affected regions. And also in the US, there is also a community of Downwinders, there's also like a huge potential to collaborate with them. So there let's say our there is... there should be certain hierarchy and prioritization I believe. Not hierarchy but prioritization. When we collaborate with our international actors to give more opportunities to fellow nuclear affected communities. So they are first, I believe, in line. After that we as Kazakh who are trilingual, who are like, let's say modern nomads, we travel the world, we work abroad, study abroad, and we have this access to international global movements like ICAN, I don't know, Peace Boat, Nuclear Peace Foundation, RTT and others. There is a lot of institutions. I believe we should refer to them and build these bridges with Semei-based, Kazakhstan-based grassroot civil society organizations and do this work.

Besides that, I could say this mentioned organizations as the second in line, but I wanted to emphasize also youth-led or just youth organizations. There is a lot of coalitions registered and registered ones, and we usually engage in different kinds of projects and collaborations with them. Like there is going to be a couple of media campaigns with Japanese youths, also all nuclear affected youths and the US based youth. So I believe this is a second important group of international partners. And I would also emphasize, of course, obviously the UN agencies, UNODA and other kind of relevant organizations, they reach out to us a lot. And this year I think they kind of, for example, all these years, there was one campaign STEP UP, STEP UP FOR DISARMAMENT that was supported by my fellow Kazakhs. Personally, I wasn't quite engaged in that, but they did it in personal capacity and supported the UNODA-led campaigns, supported by Kazakh government. But we were not always invited to be, you know, officially representative in the campaign in social media, on their website and attend the events. But this year they reached out to us first to have these consultations with us and understand how they can enhance it. This is really important because a lot of conversations were happening and still happening about us, but without us. And this is super problematic. I think it's super obvious, but now it's changing and I believe it's again a part of our nuclear justice advocacy work. So yeah, I would mention these three different groups that we collaborate with. But beyond that I believe another group of important stakeholders for us. And it's actually quite surprising

coming from some authoritarian regime where civil society, government relations have really been shaky, and that we are collaborating quite good with governments, ministries of foreign affairs, embassies. So I'm foreseeing a lot of collaborations with these kind of stakeholders in the upcoming months and years.

Michal Onderco: Yeah. You mentioned your cooperation with ICAN. ICAN is sometimes considered to be a movement that is Western-dominated. And what's your what's your view on that?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Absolutely. I really love this question. And let's be honest about it. So first they have this old-school, new school in disarmament clash. So ICAN is like a new school. And they're really doing great, and we should tribute to them for winning the Nobel Peace Prize. But again, it was thanks to the support of nuclear affected communities from Japan and beyond. Yeah, it's Western-dominated. It's Western-oriented in certain aspects, and they're taking all the space and we are sick of it, to be honest, like we are seeing in more and more. I'm personally quite let's say open minded person and really trying to understand, I'm more diplomatic. But some of my colleagues, they could be quite, quite direct. And yeah, they raise really harsh and open questions to people like ICAN. For example ICAN is taking over even the discourse around certain topics that should be, I think, led by people who are affected by that issue. For example, they're trying to dominate the discussions and eventually the policy making, decision-making around victim assistance and environmental remediation, which is good. We support your work and thank you for your coordination. But sometimes they're taking too much, and they want to kind of take this role from nuclear affected communities and take the lead. And I understand that, which is okay, but I think they have really problem really a lot of problems with understanding the root of this problem. So if you see just the numbers and the, let's say the team that is over all these activities at ICAN and their main key branches around the world, there's a big, let's say, group of people from non-nuclear affected communities and not even from nuclear armed states. And it's okay for them to work, and it's actually their moral duty to do so, but I think they're not quite familiar with certain rules. For example. Now I'm collaborating....

Michal Onderco: Can you give me an example?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah I'm coming to this. Like now I'm collaborating with Nuclear Truth Initiative, NTI for short. It's a US-based organization. And they have a document called The Protocols. It's a set of rules on how you should communicate, collaborate with nuclear affected communities. It was created in consultation with indigenous peoples in the US and in Japan and beyond. And now I'm translating and adapting this document into Kazakh and Russian languages to deliver to our people in Kazakhstan. But I believe in the future we will create also our own protocols with all, you know, these cultural aspects, all sensitivities. And this ICAN people and not only them, also a lot of, let's say, Western-oriented disarmament civil society organizations, they're not familiar about this kind of unwritten rules and even about written ones. So I believe there should be more respect and understanding from them. There is also another, for example, US-based organization that we are collaborating with now and the quality of conversation with us and for example, with our foreign partners are like different. The way they approach to us is... humiliating sometimes. And for example, I usually try to close my eyes

to that, and it's just, you know, a new possibility, and let's advocate for nuclear justice. But, you know, in the long term, it's not sustainable at all. And it's visible in, in every activity, not only with this kind of organizations and their projects, but also in academic discussions and also in other professional settings. So I believe we should... That's why I was referring that we are now creating this new affected communities, trying to build our capacities and build... because actually we don't need someone like ICAN, like they could collaborate with us, like let's say an international partner because they have all these resources, all this authority to do so. But they're not interested in giving this role because they are leading it and so on. But actually we have this historical right to do so. We suffered, still suffering and will suffer eventually. So why we should be secondary level actors in all of this? So now I think we will prioritize ourselves but keep collaborating with them. But there is a lot of criticism. Actually I'm quite I think quite critical now, but I'm also trying to stay diplomatic...

Michal Onderco: But you mentioned there is also a criticism of the academic engagement. And one of the questions that I had was about your engagement with academics and academia. Can you tell me something more about that?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. And also journalists.

Michal Onderco: We can get to journalists as well.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. For example, there was a lot of research on nuclear politics, nuclear weapons, testing in Kazakhstan before, later and now by Kazakh scholars. Or before, by the Soviet scholars. And but afterward there was a dominance also of I think foreign scholars. And that's okay, we were busy with other issues. But if you just see you through all their works, it's mostly... it's okay, it's natural to come with different perspective and analyzing it. But actually to make it more quality and more actually wholesome, you should engage local scholars with local perspectives and also perspectives of, again, nuclear affected communities. So there was a lot of, I think, problems in that direction. And the same goes with journalists like when they approach to nuclear affected communities, there is absolute, sometimes zero respect towards their views, their identities, their histories. Like all the questions, direct questions that they ask, even from really renowned world news agencies. It's actually sad, this lack of work ethic and empathy, even on the human level. I see only you know this desire from certain scholars, journalists, civil society organizations and more just to capitalize sometimes on this suffering, on this really exclusive, I mean, niche topic. So they take this region, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, they try to analyze and create some knowledge, and then they just build their careers and there is no return back to those people from whom they could build this this career capital and academic capital, right? I even saw this kind of, let's say developments among German civil society actors that visited Kazakhstan recently. But once we communicated these problematic aspects in the beginning of their projects, concept notes, yeah they changed that. But I think we can be critical about all of this, but now me and my friends and colleagues, we are trying to take a lead and create these kind of protocols because we're tired of explaining this over and over again. And I think it's also our responsibility to tell these rules, to set these boundaries and all these etiquettes and, you know, protocol. Because they are external players, they came, of course, they're not familiar about the context....

Michal Onderco: But what are the most important things that they miss, for example?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Oh, you know, Michael, it's like a complex, like they miss a lot of stuff...

Michal Onderco: Tell me three.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. First and foremost just lack of home assignment. They don't do the homework. They come with zero knowledge sometimes about the recent developments in Central Asia, in Kazakhstan, Eurasia, Turkic world. And also they are not well familiar with the local context. They're still viewing, for example, scholars They are still viewing this region as like, post-Soviet region. Of course, it's still like this in many aspects, but also it's been more than 30 years. And when they ask me some questions about this, like, you know, something related to Soviet stuff I don't quite identify myself with that because I was born in 2001 in an independent Kazakhstan, and I don't know much about the feelings of people in those periods. So maybe you should ask older generations about that. But let's talk about the current changes or the way they approach the Kazakh language, Kazakh culture and Kazakhs. Or the way they, let's say devalue the colonial movement. You know, there is a new way of really also renaissance of decolonization studies, the colonization movement in Central Asia after a set of events, for example, Russian-Ukrainian war and yeah the demographics are changing. So you should know all these. It's not even all those sensitive aspects. It's like critical key information that you should know before you visit. And they are uninformed about that.

Michal Onderco: This renaissance in decolonization, does that interact in any way with your disarmament work?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Absolutely. In our team we have for example, Aigerim and [name of person] that work more than us on decolonizing the nuclear field and the nuclear history and also the advocating for nuclear justice radicalization lens.

Michal Onderco: We also understand what does that mean in practice?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So, as you know, for a long time even just discussions about nuclear weapons, they were dominated by white upper class communities. And now they're just breaking the chain, breaking the cycle and entering these conversations. They try to conduct research on this topic, starting from just short policy briefs and articles to more like academic papers. They're also trying to engage with other regional decolonial scholars, for example, there is one work by also one of leading Kazakh scholars, Marzhan Nurzhan. She was in this field away before us, but she's a bit now... she took a pause, I think from activism and so on. So she collaborated with Algerian decolonial scholar. So they made a comparative analysis of the nuclear testing there and there. So this is another practical aspect they're working on. And more to come. Like we have a lot of ideas. We're just small in number, yet, and we're small in resources, yet. But a lot of things are coming, and we kind of, I think, come with a lot of a lot of initiatives. And we have a lot of enthusiasm and I'm really, really excited about this. But besides that, there is also decolonizing work in history, history of Kazakhstan, Kazakhs. And I think there is a huge potential when we can connect the nuclear justice or nuclear history of Kazakhstan, nuclear legacy and other aspects, because, as I said, Abai region, also Semei city. It was called as Alash-Qala, or Alash city and it was the capital of Kazakh intelligentsia in 20s of the last century. And it was a home to a lot of writers, poets and other leaders. And there is a lot, a lot to discover for our historians. And I think they're just not now engaged with nuclear topics because they don't know about these developments, but we will soon reach out to them.

But because there is so much to learn, so much to work on, and we should just continue the work of our prominent scholar, Togzhan Kassenova, because she did a fabulous, like, really phenomenal work with her, *The Atomic Steppe* book. We were privileged to translate it into a Kazakh language, now the Russian version. I don't know if I can tell it, but it's also upcoming. I think it's open information. So we'll have more, let's say, a second round of discussions around her work and we as her followers, we should continue this academic and also policy work, because there is a lot of work and it should be led by us in collaboration with other people in this field. So the decolonizing this and other aspects of our lives they're happening and they will just accelerate.

Michal Onderco: I want to move on to another part. But before I go there, in your assessment, how aware is an average person in Kazakhstan of, for example, the nuclear testing legacy? If I now flew into Astana and I took a taxi from the airport, would the taxi driver know that there was nuclear testing?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Of course I believe. I don't think I can give you the concrete statistics and I think there is no updated statistics on this topic especially, but it's a good idea to conduct a survey among the general public. I believe people know about the nuclear test site. It's not some secret information, it's declassified, and we have it in our textbooks, on television and so on. But it's still, I think, very limited understanding, very outdated understanding. And there were a lot of developments in this field and we should upgrade it with new lens, with decolonizing lens, with feminist lens and so on and so on. But people know about the Polygon, the nuclear test site, they know about the consequences, they're sad about...they're empathetic to people. But there are also those who feel distant from this. But I think they just don't know that nuclear tests happened all around the Kazakhstan, like the south, north central, western coastal regions, under ground, on the ground, on the water. And also we still have I think other nuclear related activities that are detrimental, like uranium mining in south north Kazakhstan. We have a lot of like consequences of nuclear waste, nuclear testing in not only in eastern Kazakhstan, but also in other regions. So we just should educate more, talk more about that. And their eyes will open. But yeah, if you go randomly and ask people they know. If they don't know, it's also, I believe, okay, in the sense that for a long term, for a long period, it was a taboo topic, people not knew about that, the polygon was closed, but afterward, this really difficult relationships between the first president and the city and what they did to people and communities of some is horrible. So they lost their voice, I think. And now it's reinvigorating again with the new administration. And they're so vocal about this, the Semei people that now again, they have this voice, their representatives, even they are not always effective, but at least they have them. And I think it was a good bonus point for the Tokayev administration. And they understood this regional politics. They did it for this purpose but on the secondary level, it positively contributed to the nuclear justice. Yeah. And I believe if you ask young people, they might be less informed about that. But again, there is a lot of interest in our own history in especially the topic of Polygon. And there's more to come. Like we should just work and work because we have certain ideas about peace education initiatives in Kazakhstan and beyond. And we will just do it so more people will be informed that in a modern way. So they will also know how they can affect these processes, because I really don't like when we just speak about it. Even discussion is the first step to the resolution. We should also give people the tools and

empowerment that they can do that because it happened to us in just a couple of years. And now we should support others.

Michal Onderco: I want to now move on to another part. And I want to ask you, how would you define impact and how would you know that your work has impact on the ground?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Yeah. So, you know for a long period, this sphere was dominated by someone and we didn't have access to that new information. Like I said, in 2021, even though I joined CTBTO Youth group, then the journalism academy, but before that, they were actually some steps from me to join this field because I was interested about okay, Polygon testing, it's so important, but I don't know much because I'm from the South and my knowledge is limited mostly to textbooks and so on. And when I try to do so, when I approach to my colleagues, [name] and [name] they already did some really good activism in the field, and they tried to support me, but it still was really hard just to enter this field. So our impact first and foremost that we entered enter this field fearlessly and we're still there. We're still....we are affecting the policy making first. Like I joined the working group on International Trust Fund. There we have monthly calls with our diplomats from Kazakhstan, and we discuss how the International Trust Fund for Nuclear for victim assistance and environmental remediation should be structured, worked and so on. And there is not many young people in general, and I'm not talking about Kazakhs, Central Asians. So I'm there and my colleagues also join. So this is our first impact because we want to actually impact on something that will affect the lives of our people. This is the first direction, I think, policy.

We're also trying to affect just by at least raising our voices, creating and presenting new statements on international forums like NPT Prep Com, TPNW, MSP and beyond, like regional conferences. This is the second direction we are trying actually to build our capacities. And in the future I want to do capacity building for Semei people because actually they should be in this field leading this movement. I think we have different directions where we're doing really good impact.

Maybe, like, I'm a member of effective altruism community as I told you before, and this community is basically a community of people who are trying to also quantify your impact that you... they refer to different methodologies like cost effectiveness analysis and other kind of tools. And maybe if we will, let's say, quantify and conduct some research on our interventions, actually, maybe there is no impact at all, unfortunately. But let's say on regional level or city level, we are doing as I said, we organize this study trip. Now there is a new round of civil society, government engagement, ten new projects. This is a massive impact. Maybe on global level it's 0.00 something. But on the level of Semei city, Kazakhstan is a huge thing. I believe now I'm trying to refer to this effective altruism. It's only about me. I'm not talking about my colleagues because they are not members of this community. Their approaches are different. So for me, like, I would like to focus now and understand the impact in policy interventions because there is like a wave of opportunities for us that are coming, and I want to use it smartly for the common goal, for the best course. And that's why I'm thinking about maybe creating another structure where we can advocate solely on policies on national and international levels and like take our lead in these negotiations in all these processes. And yeah, this on the one hand.

There is going to be also a re-evaluation of how current law of 1992 on Semei law. We discussed it a lot during our study trip. It's one of the really problematic topics of ours, even though Semei law is comparatively more progressive, even to RECA, another of those similar laws around the world, it still has its own imperfections. So government and other communities want they want to update it, but maybe there's going to be a risk that they will change it in a detrimental way. So people, nuclear survivors will lose their privileges, certain privileges, quotas and so on. But yeah, we also should engage in these discussions. Otherwise there is a risk that the compensation that they receive that's not enough for most of them, will be minimized and so on. So, yeah, I think we should maybe quantify our interactions in the last 4 or 5 years. Let's make analysis of what, what we have done, what's worked or what did not and so on. We already know more or less about our impact. But we should also make it let's say smart in upcoming years.

Michal Onderco: And how would you know that your... do you think that your organization is successful? And how do you measure the successes or what's the indicator of success for you?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: So STOP Organization, I believe, is quite successful because it's not what I see or how I evaluate, but what I've heard from others. So we launched just last year. We casually entered the second MSP to the TPNW, we made it to the New York headquarters. We just, you know, joined all these policy working groups. We did the first ever international study tour with international partners. Now we are doing this for us. I think it's a lot for a youth organization without proper funding, without proper support from government in most of the cases. So I believe here we are quite successful for a baby organization, but at the same time I believe, because we are young and also we are a bit... we are located in different cities, it's hard to always coordinate. That's why we're a bit, let's say disorganized now and it's okay. So let's say maybe we didn't reflect enough on our successes. I would like to do it on our first one-year anniversary in October, November, approximately, and understand what we did in one year, each individual and also us as an organization. What our lessons and our successes and also our points of growth, what we could do and couldn't. Um, so I believe our success is that we entered this field, we made it to some kind of institution. We worked with all stakeholders, actually, you know Michal, even those for working young stakeholders in, you know, in, let's say, Algeria or Marshall Islands and beyond, similar nuclear affected regions countries, or even in, let's say in Germany, nuclear armed states and so on. They don't always can do what we could, like casually with MFA. Actually, it was also surprising for us that MFA is quite open, if you can appeal to disarmament, nuclear justice and nonproliferation in the way that is a win win for all of us. Actually, whatever we would do, it's positive for all of us. But if we can also frame it in the way that it's safe for our foreign policy and find these points of connections then yeah, absolutely, there is a potential for fruitful cooperation in the long term. So I believe there is a lot of successes, but we should reflect on them. But everything that I mentioned, what we've done, what we are doing, they're successes, I believe. Especially in the political policy sector because we did a lot in activism. And this is what other fellow disarmament advocates were doing for ages. And this is not something new, but it's impactful and it's successful in the terms that we're doing it from Kazakhstan, about Kazakhstan.

Michal Onderco: I want to now move on to the last part of the interview, and I want to ask you, what's your expectation for the future of the field? In the next few years, where do you think the whole nuclear disarmament field is going?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Oh. Good question.

Michal Onderco: Or at least in Kazakhstan, since you probably know it better.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Let me try with Kazakhstan, because I'm more certain about this. When it comes to global movement, I don't know about all the developments, but also my perspective as a person who is collaborating with them. There is a new wave of civil society movement. Different kind of. We should unite. We are uniting and trying to actually consolidate our efforts. And there is going to be, I think, some kind of boom in the third MSP. This is what I'm expecting and we are prepared for that. I mean, in the positive way that, nothing I think revolutionary. Revolutionary in its nature, but not in the political way. But yeah, again, I believe there is going to be more and more players, more projects, more research, more everything basically. And yeah, we're gonna break this chain of taboo and silence. There should be a lot of work on medical clinical studies, on psychological mental health issues of Semei people, nuclear affected survivors, nuclear affected communities and survivors. A lot of, you know, potential, Michal, and we should work on this. And I think more people will join us. We're gonna stay there.

But at the same time, I see a lot of risks. Especially recently, we gave one interview to one media. It's a big audience, and we were quite vocal and critical about a lot of aspects, but especially, you know, all we are doing on nuclear justice, it's connected with Soviet government and who is the successor of Soviet government, which is the modern Russian Federation and currently Kazakhstan and Russia. We are having not so well relations even on the diplomatic state level. And we're kind of contributing to even deteriorating these really hard relationships now. I believe maybe there are there is going to be a set of challenges and maybe some attacks on these movements. But as I said, we should...Personally I will try to develop in this in this direction with probably Russian counterparts because some people can hate them, some people can be neutral about them, just ignore them, but there are those who should do a lot of work in this field for the nuclear justice. And I see potential even considering the current context. We should understand that they're our neighbors, they are our partners unfortunately, or fortunately in many aspects. And there are those who should do a lot of work for nuclear justice in Kazakhstan and internationally. But what they're doing, like they ratified CTBT, nuclear blackmailing in Zaporizhzhia, in Ukraine and beyond. Even also non-nuclear related attacks on Kazakhstan, like about the northern Kazakhstan, about Russian language, even though Kazakhstan is quite inclusive in that sense, more inclusive than Russian Federation in many aspects. So yeah, I see also risks like this, and I don't know what kind of conflicts we are going to face. But recently I saw a set of attacks from the deputies of Russia, from civil society and so on. We're actually used to this, but it's starting to accelerate more and more. And who knows what will happen in the coming years and how it can affect our work. So yeah, I am both enthusiastic and excited about them, but at the same time, we should know certain risks and we should assess them. But about the global community, I believe we are gonna work a lot. But you know, I just read that in 2021 there was a shortage of funding for nuclear security, which is

a bit different here, but it's still affecting the disarmament and non-proliferation. And what I'm seeing is that people in this sphere, they are less empathetic than they were before. But at the same time, they're excited to see us. So there is no problem with us. But I believe they already have these hard relationships between certain players, major players. And it will lead to the fact that disarmament and nonproliferation people will just lose while these nuclear armed states will prosper.

And Yeah, also with the rise of AI and its integration in nuclear command and control. Oh my God, like, we're gonna face a lot of new challenges and the disarmament community is not ready at all, I think for that. because there is a lack of discussions on A.I. and its impact on weaponization. So it's another area that I'm working now, the AI governance impulse and weapons of mass destruction or weaponization, let's say in Turkic states, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, Turkey, Hungary. So to assess in these neglected countries what's happening and what we can do. So yeah... I'm more positive about Kazakh civil society future, but I'm not so certain about the global one. But still, I want to be hopeful just for the sake of our mental health and continuing this journey. We have really good people there. But even within disarmament community, there are people, as I said, people who are just capitalizing on the suffering of certain communities, who are just doing it for career purposes. As a pragmatic person, sometimes I try to understand, but sometimes it's too much, it's beyond the limits, it's really cynical. And maybe we will start also a round of public discourse on this issue, because otherwise we can't survive in the long term. Eventually it will appear, I think, in a couple of years, five year period, we will start discussing this because we can't be silent anymore. And a new generation of disarmament activists, scholars and so on will bring this to the table, because they're already doing that in private conversations in forums. And we're going to be more honest and open, I think on a higher level in the upcoming years.

Michal Onderco: At the end, I want to ask two questions that I ask everyone. The first question is, do you think that there will be still nuclear weapons in the world in 50 years?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: I'm not well calibrated when when it comes to forecasting, but I believe more yes than no. Do you need the percentage? No, but I will try. I believe I know that it's going to be incorrect, but considering all this proliferation and all these conflicts, I believe the current status quo will be saved up to 60 to 70 70% edge. But even 30% decrease is quite a lot. I see certain positive developments. I think after... it's going to be more clear, you know, after the end or some kind of resolution around the Ukrainian war. Usually I believe what history taught us is that after any kind of conflict involving nuclear weapons or nuclear armed states, there is a risk of proliferation and so on, but I don't believe that Russian Federation will invest too much or a lot of funding into this sector because they are, like impacted a lot by the war and but they're still resilient. But yeah, the US and People's Republic of China, they will probably be better in that sense. Let's see. Let's just follow. But I believe nuclear weapons will still be, they are present. Maybe we will not ever get rid of them and that's okay [laugh]. We will just continue our mission.

Michal Onderco: And The very last question is, imagine we have a world without nuclear weapons. How does such a world look like? Is it fundamentally different from the world that we live in today? And maybe how is security in such a world provided?

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: the first thing that came to my mind is potential nuclear catastrophe,

nuclear war. And let's say this scenario of nuclear winter at least. Yeah. So probably... it will be a world with still present nuclear, nukes, nuclear weapons and nuclear technologies, detrimental for humankind. But still, it will be at least a period when some people will survive in New Zealand, New Zealand and somewhere. And they will have some, I think, a long period of time without any kind of stability and social security. So I think they will not be concerned a lot about that and more focused on food security, survival and resilience. I believe we should be more realistic about that. This is not something futuristic because like we're 90s to midnight and there was a possibility of Russian Federation to use nuclear bombs I think in Ukraine. And also there is other conflicts involving nuclear weapons like in Israeli and Palestinian war. And yeah, we're gonna face, I think at some point, potential use of nuclear weapons, even though it's really a low probability. And in that moment, I think it's going to be clear how we will secure these deterrence, stability, whatever you call it. Even today, there is a lot of criticism, even within the deterrence community, that there is no stability, there is no security or stability anywhere. It's like this international security architecture is crashing. That's sad, but at the same time, it's good. So I'm really uncertain about this. I need to explore more. And I think I'm going to be more clear about this in the upcoming years. But yeah, so far, I think, thinking about stability and security in the world of nuclear, in the nuclear weapons-free world, it's something that we shouldn't think, we should more focus maybe on resilience, food security, how we could restore our world.

But you know, Michal, I don't believe that there is going to be a world free of nuclear weapons, even if we will reach it. Of course not in this century, not in the next one. And you know, maybe these conversations are even pointless in the long term because we're gonna probably reach to transformative AI by 2040, 2050. Recently, one of the leading scholars he said that it's going to happen by 2029. So maybe we will reach the world of nuclear free without nuclear weapons, but probably a world with AI that is smart enough to coordinate the governments. Maybe it sounds fun and surreal in certain moments, but this is where we are coming. While we are focusing solely on nukes, we're really blind on this. So we should now bring this to areas. And yeah, let's just see. Let's just keep focused and maybe we will reach nuclear weapons free world someday.

Michal Onderco: Perfect. Thank you very much for the interview.

Yerdaulet Rakhmatulla: Thank you too.