



# THE OXUS SOCIETY FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS



## AITYS(H) AS A FORM OF CIVIC ACTIVISM IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

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# AITYS(H) AS A FORM OF CIVIC ACTIVISM IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

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## Acknowledgement

We would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all those who contributed to the creation of this policy brief. Special thanks go to Dr. Aizhan Sharshenova, Dr. Edward Lemon for their invaluable guidance and expertise. We are also grateful to Symbat Abisheva for her assistance in data collection and analysis. Additionally, we would like to thank all our interviewees for their participation in this research project. This policy brief would not have been possible without their support.



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## INTRODUCTION

The Bloody January events of January 2022, in which thousands took to the streets to protest against the government of Kazakhstan, demonstrated how a lack of civic engagement and a perceived disconnect between the government and the people can lead to social discontent and unrest (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022). Yet since those events, the space for civic activism has shrunk in Kazakhstan. Kazakh authorities continue to pass increasingly restrictive regulations regarding civil society organizations and place pressure on critics (Wood, 2023). NGOs are subject to extensive legal restrictions (Freedom House, 2023). Currently, neither the media nor civil society has a meaningful opportunity to provide independent commentary or input on pending laws (Freedom House, 2023). The media law prevents internet users from posting anonymous comments online. In Tokayev's Kazakhstan, a variety of extralegal pressure targets activists, including surveillance, phone tapping, arbitrary detention and torture (Wood, 2023, p.51).

Under Sadyr Japarov, who came to power during a revolution in 2020, Kyrgyzstan has taken an authoritarian turn. The government imposed a ban on public gatherings in Bishkek in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine as well as the detention of activists, human rights defenders, and opposition politicians for peaceful dissent against a border deal agreement with Uzbekistan in late 2022. The independent media has also come under pressure, with the arrest of investigative journalist Bolot Temirov and improvisational poet and singer (*aqyn*) Bolot Nazarov and the blocking of RFE/RL's Kyrgyz service, Azattyk and independent media outlet *Kloop* (Freedom House 2023).

In light of this shrinking space for activism, both countries are grappling with the problem of insufficient civic engagement.





The purpose of this policy brief is to address the lack of dialogue and conflict resolution between the public and authorities by proposing *aitys(h)* as an alternative platform.<sup>[1]</sup> *Aitys(h)* is a public contestation based on musical-poetry improvisation between *aqyns* (poets, bards) which presumes that *aqyns* gain social recognition. *Aitys(h)* performer or *aqyn* is a poet who speaks or sings oral improvised poetry in the accompaniment of traditional musical string instruments – Kazakh *dombyra* or Kyrgyz *komuz*. In the academic literature, *aitys(h)* has been viewed from three perspectives: as a form of oral literature in folklore studies, linguistics (Kendirbaeva 1994; Dubuisson 2021; Dubuisson 2017), as art and music (Levin et al. 2016), and as a tool of communication (Saubayev et al. 2014).

This policy brief examines *aitys(h)* from a new perspective as a form of civic activism. At its core, activism is about “highlighting injustices and advocating for a better future” (Brooks, 2023). The capacity of *aitys(h)* to facilitate dialogue between the governments and citizenry requires attention and thorough research. The artistic forms of activism are deeply rooted in the local traditions, values, and culture and thus may be particularly effective in the context of decolonization and raising national identities. Historically, *aqyns* spoke on behalf of people and publicly criticized leaders for their wrongdoings and injustices (Levin et al. 2016, p. 199). By providing spaces for citizens to express their concerns and for governments to listen and respond, it becomes possible to address conflicts and disputes peacefully and constructively.

This policy brief is structured around three main themes. The first part focuses on the historical background and modern context in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The second part includes the interplay between *aitys(h)* and politics, and the social and geographic outreach of *aitys(h)*. The third part is dedicated to exploring the role of *aitys(h)* in raising awareness and inspiring action. Recommendations to the governing bodies as well as *aitys(h)* supporters in both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan conclude the paper.



## METHODOLOGY

We employed various methods, including five in-depth interviews in Kazakhstan and six interviews in Kyrgyzstan. We also conducted desk research to define civic activism accurately and establish the context of contemporary *aitys(h)* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Field research consisted of two phases. First, we screened and monitored social media to identify and find out more about local *aitys(h)* initiatives, *aitys(h)* events to assess the spread of *aitys(h)* across the country and to find *aitys(h)* enthusiasts, reach out to famous artists, *aqyns*, and organizers of *aitys(h)* and, finally, send them an invitation to give an interview. In the second phase, we focused on in-depth interviews and their transcription. Fieldwork took place between July and November 2023. A participant observation method of data collection was employed to analyze audience and *aitys(h)* narrative at an *aitys(h)* dedicated to the national language day in Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek as well as an *aitys(h)* dedicated to the memory of Maira Kerim kyzy, a Kazakh *aitys(h)*ker that performed and contributed to *aitys(h)* in Kyrgyzstan (November 5, 2023).

Our main object of research were *aqyn-aitys(h)*kers, the performers themselves. Four *aqyn-aitys(h)*kers and one frequent attendee at *aitys(h)* performances were interviewed in Kazakhstan. The *aqyns* came from different regions of Kazakhstan, including Aktobe, Pavlodar, Almaty and Mangistay. In Kyrgyzstan, two *aqyn-aitys(h)*kers, two *aitys(h)* attendees, one *aitys(h)* organizer, and one expert were interviewed. Both interviewed *aqyns* are based in Bishkek and perform *aitys(h)* all over the country.



## INTRODUCING AITYS(H)

Both Kazakh and Kyrgyz people led nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyles before collectivization in the 1930s. Because of the nomadic lifestyle a written culture was not developed, but oral poetry was instead used as a key method of communication.<sup>[2]</sup> Aqyns were tasked with remembering what was deemed important for the collective memory of their communities and to share it with people of different generations. According to expert Elmira Kochumkulova, “aqyns mastered the skill of eloquence and memory and sophisticated form of communication of preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge.”<sup>[3]</sup>

Today, traditional *aitys(h)* performances are typically organized to commemorate deceased public figures or national anniversaries. *Aitys(h)* adopts thematic approaches, such as dedications to Independence Day, significant historical figures, poets or anniversaries of a city or a village.

In Kyrgyzstan, a significant portion of support for *aitys(h)* performances comes from a public fund. In Kazakhstan, support for *aitys(h)* is multi-faceted. The majority of performances today are financed by the government, the Ministry of Culture and Information, local municipalities, and the pro-government political party Amanat. But the International Union of Jyrshi-termeshiler and Aqyn-*aitys(h)* kerler in Kazakhstan, however, receives no government funding.

*Aitys(h)* events can be organized at various levels: regional, national, and international. At the regional level, *aitys(h)* tends to be freer but has fewer viewers. National-level *aitys(h)* events are visited by thousands of people including academics, decision-makers, and national artists. Moreover, national *aitys(h)* performances are broadcast live on national television. On the international stage, *aitys(h)* takes on even greater significance, with participants representing their entire nation.<sup>[4]</sup>

## AITYS(H) ACTIVISM

The practice of *aqyns* engaging in politics is not new. Soviet-Kazakh *aqyn* Jambyl Jabaev was awarded the Stalin Prize, and appointed a member of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). Two well-known Kyrgyz *aqyns*, Alymkul Üsönbaev and Estebes Tursunaliyev, were members of the Supreme Council of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). (Levin et al. 2016, p. 199) In Kazakhstan, it is common for poets to transition into professional politics due to their prominent societal role. In the last 2023 parliamentary elections in Kazakhstan, there were four candidates to the lower chamber of parliament and nine candidates to the municipal councils who were *aqyns*. *Aitys(h)*ker Rinat Zaitov, known for his loud criticism of the authorities, became a deputy of the lower house of parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan as a representative of the ruling Amanat party. Amanzhol Al'tayev, a famous *aitys(h)*ker is another member of parliament while often hosting *aitys(h)* performances all over the country. For political elites, this practice allows them to “kill two birds with one stone”: to win loyalty with their critics and to attract the masses supporting the *aqyn* during the election race.

In Kyrgyzstan, *aqyns* are not formally affiliated with any political party and do not enter politics while being *aqyns*. They try to assume a neutral observing role. If they do get associated with politicians and are seen performing at political campaigns then their “rating” falls in the public eye. For *aqyn* the efficient way to engage with people is to lighten up their mood, lift the audience spirit and then present a serious topic as food for thought. According to Kubat Tukeshov:

*If you raise people’s concerns, then there will be a lot of reaction from the people. But aitys(h) has its own context, you cannot just start telling about something straight away. It is necessary to build up to that atmosphere, to the peak.* <sup>[5]</sup>





In the delivery process of a message, the “how” of one’s message communication is crucial. Undoubtedly, political elites are aware of the political consequences of the poetic genre. Historically, only *aqyns* dared to publicly criticize leaders for their wrongdoings and injustices.

The *aitys(h)*’s audience has traditionally consisted of older individuals, but there is now noticeable shifts in the demographics of the audience in both countries. In Kazakhstan, the audience for *aitys(h)* performances is generally getting older, which is why it is important to find ways to make *aitys(h)* more popular among younger people. Whereas in Kyrgyzstan, there is a trend of attracting a younger audience, both rural and urban youth. This change in the audience is seen as a positive sign by *aitys(h)*kers, indicating a revitalization of interest in national culture among young people.

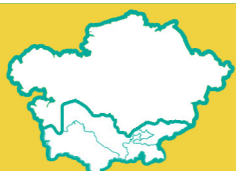
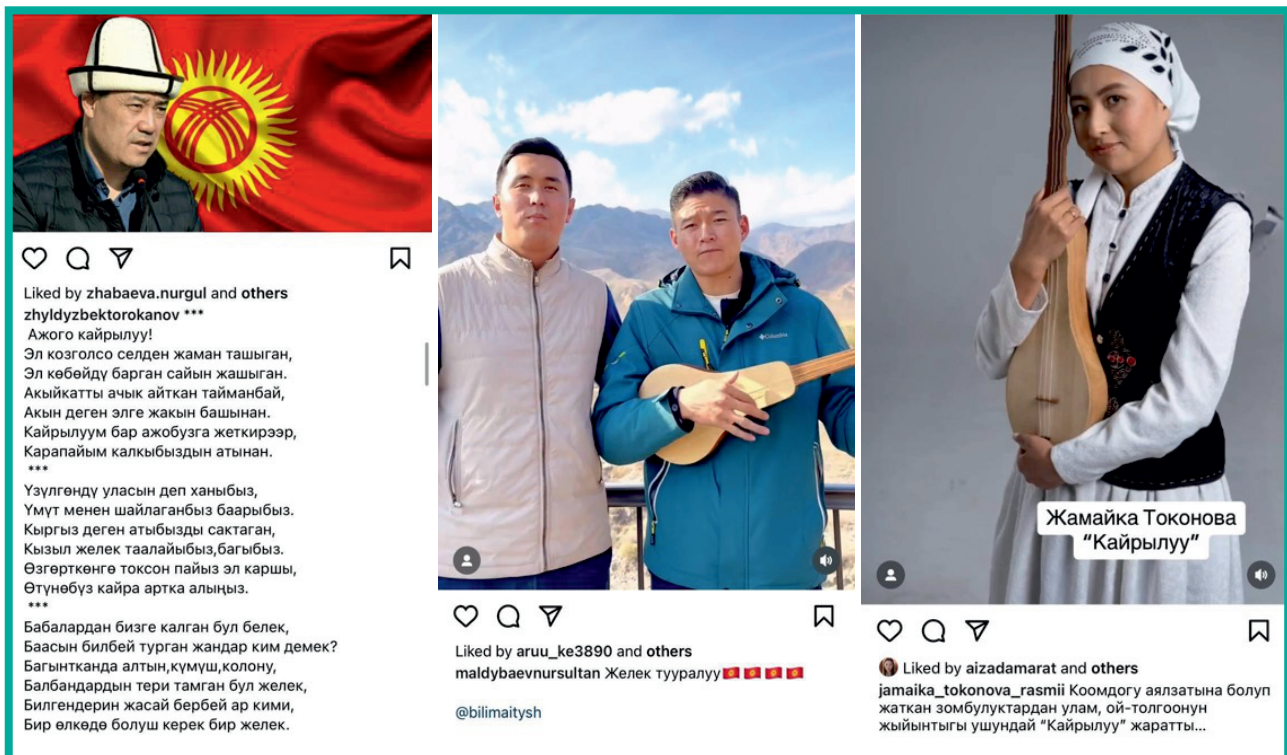
Elmira Kochumkulova argues that *aqyns* play a big role in shaping public opinions and public discourse, making a valuable contribution to society.

*Aqyns make a great contribution to creating, speaking, informing and making sense of public opinion. Representatives of the authorities attend aitys(h), sometimes even the president comes, since aitys(h) is also organized at major state events. Representatives from the presidential office, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and deputies also attend aitys(h). Aqyns try to use this moment to tell people’s opinion, concerns and problems.* <sup>[6]</sup>

According to our observations, within the last year, the majority of Kazakh *aitys(h)* performances were organized in regional cities, towns, or villages. For 2023 we found more than 30 events organized all over the country. These took place in Aktau, Atyrau, Shymkent, Pavlodar, Kyzylorda, Almaty, Satbayev, Konayev, Zhezkazgan, Turkistan, Semey, Taraz, Petropavl, Oskemen, Kokshetau and in smaller towns. Pavlodar region and Mangistau region, including Aktau city, are

the most frequent locations of *aitys(h)* performances. *Aitys(h)* in Kyrgyzstan, however, is organized predominantly in bigger cities such as Bishkek and Osh several times a year. *Aitys(h)* is also organized in villages and at the regional level but less frequently.

The rise of the internet has changed *aitys(h)* and *aqyns'* visibility. People often watch *aitys(h)* fragments on social media or they can watch live stream broadcasts from national TV channels. While one can find full *aitys(h)* videos on Youtube, small fragments of *aitys(h)* with particular messages or punchlines are usually shared by *aqyns* themselves on their Instagram pages. There is a noticeable contrast in how *aqyns* in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan utilize social media and the internet. In Kyrgyzstan, *aqyns* are more responsive to societal changes and engage rapidly on social media, adapting quickly. Conversely, in Kazakhstan, *aqyns* do not tend to respond immediately to changes through their social media platforms.



## AITYS(H) AS A FORM OF CIVIC ACTIVISM IN KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

In the first two screenshots, Zhyldyzbek Torokanov, Nursultan Maldybaev, and Azamat Asanbekov addressed public dissatisfaction regarding the abrupt change in Kyrgyzstan's 30-year-old flag. Zhyldyzbek emphasized the role of *aqyns* in representing people's opinions, highlighting that 90% of the population opposed the flag change and emphasizing that such decisions shouldn't be made arbitrarily by certain individuals. Nursultan and Azamat questioned the justification that changing the flag symbolized a new beginning for the country, arguing instead that real improvements require tangible actions rather than symbolic gestures like changing the flag. They urged decision-makers to focus on implementing concrete steps for improvement rather than altering the national symbol. In the third screenshot, Jamaika Tokonova sang passionately about the concerning increase in gender-based violence. She conveyed the heartbreaking stories of girls who have suffered harassment, rape, and tragic deaths at the hands of men. Her powerful lyrics underscored the collective failure of society, men, and elders in safeguarding the well-being of girls. Furthermore, she addressed the shortcomings of existing laws in effectively protecting victims of gender-based violence, ultimately leaving them vulnerable to their aggressors.



## THE ROLE OF AITYS(H) IN RAISING AWARENESS AND INSPIRING ACTION

Kyrgyz *aqyns* refer to themselves as “*el agartuuchu*” or enlighteners of the people. *Aqyndyk* is not merely a profession or a hobby for poets, it transcends individual desires and is better referred to as a duty. Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns* agree that financial gain should never be their primary purpose. As Kubat Tukeshov from Kyrgyzstan explains,

*Aqyndyk is not for filling your pocket but for enriching your soul.* <sup>[7]</sup>

Sholpan Baigaly from Pavlodar sums up:

*Aqyndyk is not a profession, but spiritual food, of which I am a propagator via songs. I convey the truth using beautiful metaphors and proverbs. I am the one who demonstrates high morals with my heart-warming poems.* <sup>[8]</sup>

Being the voice of the people implies bridging the gap between the people and the authorities. Shugaiyp Sezimkhan also highlights that *aqyndyk* is a golden bridge between people and authorities:

*Aqyn is a golden bridge in the sense of delivering public concerns to the authorities, explaining the issues that are stuck and have to be resolved. For example, in the first years of independence, these writers and poets played a great role in the formation of the nation and the development of our native language.* <sup>[9]</sup>

Our respondents also highlighted the role of *aqyns* as bridging different social layers and conveying critical issues to those in power. They serve as high



ambassadors capable of skillfully delivering messages from the people to the ruling elite, vice versa and among different generations of people.

Respondents, including Elmira Kochumkulova, Jamaika and Sholpan Baigaly, argued that the medium of delivery is key to the resonance of the *aqyn*'s message. Jamaika compares artistically expressed messages to a powerful, piercing blow:

*My main goal is to serve as a bridge for the people, to bring the unspoken problems under spotlight so they are heard by the decision-makers. If you just tell someone - it will not reach them, if you tell someone through a song, sarcasm, and improvisation, he/she will take it as hard as a knife stabbed in his/her heart.* <sup>[10]</sup>

Kyrgyz as well as Kazakh *aqyns* address a variety of critical issues in their performances. For instance, recent themes have revolved around gender issues, border-related topics such as trucks stuck in traffic at border checkpoints and water shortages. Kyrgyz *aqyns* frequently address regional issues like road construction. Meirbek Salamat from Mangistau region said his performances mention:

*The lack of drinking water in Aktau, the Caspian Sea's decline, and environmental issues that need ministries' attention were all discussed during yesterday's aitys in Aktau.* <sup>[11]</sup>

Kyrgyz *aqyns* delve into broader societal themes encompassing national values, education, social matters, economic challenges, and various gender and psychosocial issues. Notably, they express apprehension about the rise in aggression and the diminishing qualities of kindness in society.

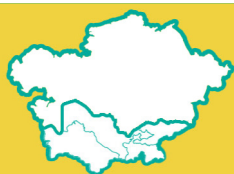
In their ability to highlight injustice and raise attention to the needs of the people, *aitys(h)* is a form of civic activism. It can be acknowledged that in Kyrgyzstan the term "activist" has undergone a transformation in popular perception, influenced

by the country's authoritarian turn under Japarov and Russian-language discourses on “foreign agents,” now often evoking images of radical protesters. As a result, conventionally, *aqyns* do not commonly regard themselves as activists.

In contrast to Kyrgyz *aqyns*, Kazakh *aqyns* are less active in providing social commentary. There are hundreds of Kazakh *aqyns*, but only parliamentarian Rinat Zaiytov stands out by raising social issues. Yet, in response to the question of whether they consider themselves civil activists, Kazakh *aqyns* are unanimous in the positive assessment of their role as civic activists. But this is changing. Meirbek Salamat, the youngest *aqyn* we interviewed, highlights:

*We are now becoming social activists. In time, more people are becoming familiar with us and our opinion spreads faster and more widely. The more we express our opinions and participate in aityys(h), the more active we become in society. As social activists, we are being formed in this way.* <sup>[12]</sup>

In this sense *aqyns* are not afraid to identify themselves with a group of civic activists. The impact of *aitys(h)* in Kazakhstan is tangible. Interviewed *aqyns* could list examples when an issue raised in *aitys(h)* was subsequently addressed. According to Essentugel Azi, in Baiganin region an Alley of Poets was opened after he raised this issue in *aitys(h)*. The absence of school for young poets in Aktau was brought up by a young *aqyn* Meirbek Salamat. The school will open its doors in the coming months in Aktau. Shugaiyp Sezimkhan mentioned the case when a new road was installed following the raising of concerns in *aitys(h)* in honor of Kazakh poet Abai Qunanbaiuly.





## THE RISKS AND DANGERS FOR AITYS(H)

According to Freedom House's Nations in Transit 2023 ranking, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are considered consolidated authoritarian regimes (Freedom House, Nations in Transit, 2023). In both countries, activists, journalists, and opposition figures are routinely prosecuted and sentenced for political reasons. It is essential for *aqyns* to have the freedom to express themselves without external limitations. Censorship is forbidden by the Constitution in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Still, we can observe the practice of self-censorship among Kazakh and Kyrgyz *aqyns*. Kyrgyz *aqyns* point out that they were asked to avoid raising the problems which might "degrade" Kyrgyz *aitys(h)*. In his performance, on November 5, 2023, Kyrgyz *aqyn* Bayan Akmatov sang that there is no friendship in politics (referring to current president Sadyr Japarov and his friend and the head of the Kyrgyz security service Kamchibek Tashiev) and immediately added: "I'd rather hold my tongue so that not to become a neighbor of Olzhobay Shakir." <sup>[13]</sup> Olzhobay Shakir is a famous Kyrgyz writer and activist who protested against the transfer of health resorts on Lake Issyk Kul to Uzbekistan and was jailed (Radio Azattyq, 2023).

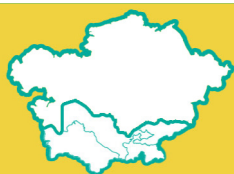
All interviewed Kazakh *aqyns* cited examples of restrictions on their performances, harassment, or even imprisonment of their colleagues. Often they refer to the case of Rinat Zaiytov. In June 2019 in the aftermath of presidential elections famous for his active civic engagement and critique of contemporary *aitys(h)* and *aitys(h)* kers *aqyn* Rinat Zaitov was taken into custody by law enforcement authorities due to his involvement in gathering that has not been officially authorized by the Almaty authorities. <sup>[14]</sup> Shugaiyp Sezimkhan also mentioned an *aqyn* from the Western Kazakhstan who denounced former president Nursultan Nazarbayev in his performance which further led to harassment. One of the interviewed *aqyns* mentioned facing pressure in the aftermath of critique towards a government official. A retired *aqyn* from Aktobe confirmed that there were opposite cases

when *aqyn* who praised a government official could see his career rise and even received an apartment.

However, the younger generation of *aitys(h)* performers are more optimistic. They are confident that people's love and support represent a shield that will defend *aqyns* from the risk of being harmed or harassed: "As I am always in the public eye, they cannot put pressure on me." [15]

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Being a voice of the people and serving as a bridge between the people and authorities is the primary role of an *aqyn-aitys(h)*ker. This activism has the potential to develop further and push for better governance and improved public services in both countries. Generally speaking, Kyrgyz *aqyns* do not consider themselves activists. Their understanding of activism stems from the negative image of an activist portrayed by the official Kyrgyz media. However, they agree that *aqyns* fit the description of an activist. Kazakh *aqyns* position themselves as civic activists. As Kazakh activism has been trending away from confrontation with the government and toward a combination of activism and social entrepreneurship, *aqyns* don't hesitate to associate with social activism. Yet both are activists in so far as they offer social critiques and respond to unfolding events, such as tragedies, border conflicts, or political issues. Both countries exhibit *self-censorship*, with Kyrgyz *aqyns* feeling relatively free and Kazakh counterparts often agreeing with organizers' suggestions. Challenges include arrests in Kyrgyzstan and restrictions, harassment, or imprisonment in Kazakhstan. Despite these hurdles, *aqyns* find public support empowering, influencing their continued activism.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the Government of Kazakhstan:

- **Involve NGOs to support the art of *aitys(h)*.** Specifically, NGOs may organize courses and seminars at art schools on social problems and possible solutions that may be conveyed by *aqyns* in their performances. The government and civil society should develop and implement educational programs specifically designed for schools for *aqyns* and introduce them to the cases and materials of human rights' violations in Kazakhstan. NGOs should organize field visits that will allow young poets to witness the work of human rights activists, volunteers. This might involve visits to organizations working on child and women rights, community projects;
- **Involve pop stars by inviting them to perform at *aitys(h)*** to raise interest towards the art of *aitys(h)* among youth;
- **Organize *aitys(h)* in large cities like Astana and Almaty** to propagate the importance of *aitys(h)* at the national level and attract the attention of event agencies and the broader public.

### For the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic:

- **Take note of *aitys(h)*** and the issues raised to gain a thorough understanding of public concerns.
- **Protect *aqyns*,** shielding them from arrests and pressures when it comes to freedom of expression and upholding the Constitution;

- **Promote *aitys(h)* among minorities.** Kyrgyzstan is a multiethnic country. *Aitys(h)* can be popularized among other nationalities engaging new *aqyns* to create diversity and expansion of *aitys(h)* platform engaging Uzbeks, Russians, Koreans, Uighurs etc.

#### **For Aqyns:**

- **New topics can be introduced in *aitys(h)* discussions** such as climate change to shape people's opinions and bring change.
- **Aqyns can encourage the participation of other nationalities** to foster diversity, dialogue, and unity.

#### **For NGOs and International Organizations:**

- **Use the platform of *aitys(h)* to raise awareness on certain topics,** and facilitate discussions and civic engagement.
- **Aqyns can be trained to use social media and blogging to popularize *aitys(h)*** and spread their message as content creators.



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