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The influence of politics on the governance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in a developing country: a generative institutional discourse approach

Endrit Kromidha[a], Levent Altinay[b] and Hasan Evrim Arici[c,d]

[a]Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK; [b]Department of Strategy and Entrepreneurship, Oxford Brookes Business School, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK; [c]Faculty of Tourism, Kastamonu University, Kastamonu, Turkey; [d]EU Business School, Digital Campus, Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurship is often about the individual drive for innovation and the exploitation of opportunities; however, in an increasingly connected world, entrepreneurial ecosystems have gained considerable research interest. In many developed countries, entrepreneurial ecosystems emerge from organic collaborations between businesses and investors, with little political involvement. However, in a post-communist country like Kazakhstan, different stakeholders have diverse expectations, leading to tensions among them. In this study, we took a qualitative approach and drew from discursive institutionalism theory in entrepreneurship research in order to understand the influence of politics on the governance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. Our findings reveal tensions between collective aspirations and individual goals, generating multiple institutional logics. The generative institutional discourse that is brought about by politics, their influence on governance, and facilitating factors is a mechanism that helps to turn such tensions into policies and collective action. To gain a better understanding of the influence of politics on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems, we propose a generative institutional discourse model.

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Politics; governance; entrepreneurial ecosystem; generative discourse; institutional theory; developing country

1. Introduction

The concept of entrepreneurial ecosystems has become a hot topic due to a general realization of their potential for growth in times of change and to the high levels of connectivity found in the global economy (Cavallo, Ghezzi, and Balocco 2019). An entrepreneurial ecosystem is loosely defined as a set of factors and actors that can enable or constrain entrepreneurial activity in a given territory (Stam and Van de Ven 2021). From a policy perspective, an entrepreneurial ecosystem is perceived as a tool for regional development, contextualizing markets, research, culture, and social institutional forces (Wei 2022). From an economic perspective, entrepreneurial ecosystems are important for development (Acs et al. 2018; Meyers 2015). Although our knowledge of entrepreneurial ecosystems sits on a rich bed of interdisciplinary research (D. Audretsch et al. 2018), it remains conceptually undertheorized, and the principles that govern their evolution are poorly understood (Wurth, Stam, and Spigel 2022). Previous studies have looked at entrepreneurial ecosystem composition,

CONTACT Endrit Kromidha e.kromidha@bham.ac.uk Department of Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

relationships, and effects, but they have done so by only focussing on one or two dimensions, thus making it difficult to consider the dynamic political and governance forces in them (Daniel et al. 2022). With a lack of holistic approaches, entrepreneurship politics research has remained limited to converging and diverging discourses about agendas and interests.

A critical look at politics and governance is needed to gain a better and more holistic understanding of entrepreneurial ecosystems and of how they emerge and operate not as loose-tied hubs, but as integrated systems in an economic and social context. The few research endeavours made in this direction have focussed on specific stages of entrepreneurial ecosystems, such as their evolution from academic spin-offs (Abootorabi et al. 2021) or their life-cycle governance (Colombelli, Paolucci, and Ughetto 2019). While we know a lot about the new venture creation process and its affiliation with entrepreneurial ecosystems (Lingens, Böger, and Gassmann 2021; Marcon and Luis Duarte 2021), we know little about the politics that affect the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems in countries transitioning from one economic system to another (Ibrahimova and Moog 2023). Given this research gap, this study was aimed at responding to an important research question: *How do politics affect the governance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem?*

In answering this question and contributing to institutional theory – more specifically, to discursive institutionalism (Kromidha and Córdoba-Pachón 2017; Schmidt 2008) – we make distinct contributions by uncovering the political complexities that characterize the governance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. First, to address issues related to misaligned institutional logic in entrepreneurial ecosystems, we contextualized and positioned entrepreneurship politics as an important research domain at the intersection of politics and governance (Korber, Swail, and Krishanasamy 2022). Power tensions, conflicting priorities, and lack of vision help not only to justify the existence of politics but also reveal the inherent institutional tensions that can become enablers or inhibitors of governance and its resulting policies. Second, we proposed and developed the concept of generative discursive institutionalism as a mechanism of converging politics with governance in entrepreneurial ecosystems. We explored the influence of politics on governance in an environment of institutional voids, limited implementation, and ideological dysconnectivity, in which governance can be facilitated through strategic alliances, identity alignment, and collective learning. To summarize the abovementioned contributions, we present a conceptual framework of generative institutional discourse.

Following the introduction, we present a literature review that builds on the theory of discursive institutionalism and knowledge of politics and the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. We describe the development of a theoretical framework to guide our qualitative research methodology. We then organize our findings around a theoretical framework that captures the interface between politics and the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. The conceptual themes emerging from the interviews, observations, and engagement help to build a framework of generative institutional discourse between politics and governance in entrepreneurial ecosystems. The discussion then contributes to institutional discourse theory, and to the creative industries sector.

2. Review of theory and literature

2.1. A discursive institutionalist approach

Discursive institutionalism presents the power of ideas and debates in the creation of institutions as a generative process whereby they are formed or revised (Schmidt 2008, 2010). The theoretical approach can explain how change and stability forces are reconciled using coordinative and communicative discourses of participation, learning, and leadership (Kromidha and Córdoba-Pachón 2017). This helps to understand how, in transition economies and during times of change, governments and their stakeholders exercise power and control over other actors by creating and implementing obligatory passage channels (Kromidha 2017). In this context, politics is considered a discourse process that helps to balance institutional pluralism and the institutionalization of certain

policies and practices (Kyoung-Hee 2013). Such reconciliation is achieved by means of temporal institutions whereby, in times of change, actors construct beliefs and embrace temporality as a means to achieve the desirable changes (Granqvist and Gustafsson 2016). Research shows that the actors in entrepreneurial ecosystems co-construct politics through discursive institutionalism; for instance, in the context of corporate social responsibility (Van den Broek 2022). Consequently, the inception and construction of an entrepreneurial ecosystem present a unique opportunity to examine the generative nature of the discourse in shaping politics and the governance of ecosystems.

The concept of discourse, as suggested by discursive institutionalism (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Kromidha and Córdoba-Pachón 2017; Schmidt 2008), facilitates the transformation of ideas into a collective framework and their integration into the realm of politics. In practice, ideational power – as proposed by Carstensen and Schmidt (Carstensen and Schmidt 2021) – involves a discursive institutionalism mechanism that is manifested in three forms: power through ideas, power over ideas, and power in ideas. This necessitates individuals to actively engage in the exchange of ideas and effectively support their credibility, even when faced with opposing viewpoints (Schmidt 2010). According to Béland (2009), the political change process relies heavily on the existence of one or more players who possess the ability to advocate for and advance novel ideas. In line with Seidl's (2022) argument, players in the political arena take a strategic approach by adopting certain concepts and narratives, and actively participate in the process of framing in order to persuade others to either endorse or reject certain policy solutions based on any perceived benefits or drawbacks associated with them. Despite their considerable importance, our understanding of how ideas are transformed into changes in politics and their possible connections with other aspects is currently constrained (Parsons 2007). The objective of our study was to gain insights into the influence of politics on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems by means of a discursive institutionalism framework.

2.2. Politics and the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems

In the context of entrepreneurship, politics can be theoretically defined as a process whereby any structural barriers to entrepreneurial agency are removed in order to enable entrepreneurial orientation, intention, cognition, and action to be manifested (McMullen, Brownell, and Adams 2021). The politics of entrepreneurship revolve around a struggle for power, laws, control over decision-making, resource endowments, and legislation at the municipal, national, and global levels (Belitski, Grigore, and Bratu 2021). In this process, in which multiple stakeholders interact to collaborate, the discourse shaping the institutional environment in which entrepreneurial ecosystems are born and grow deserves more attention.

The entrepreneurial ecosystem approach stresses the fact that entrepreneurship occurs in a network of interconnected players (Cavallo, Ghezzi, and Balocco 2019; Spiegel et al. 2016). Research explains that, while entrepreneurship is a socially integrated activity (Smith and Lohrke 2008), physical infrastructure and support are equally important for an entrepreneurial ecosystem to emerge (Neck et al. 2004). This implies synergies between businesses, academic institutions, and the government in environmental and social surroundings (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2017). Such synergies can only be achieved through the effective governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. For example, in their empirical study of 11 industrialized countries, Méndez-Picazo, Galindo-Martín, and Ribeiro-Soriano (2012) uncovered a positive relationship between governance and entrepreneurship. At the same time, ineffective governance can lead to political tensions, power struggles, and the inefficient use of resources (Kromidha 2017). In such cases, politics and governance are related to transitions of power among organizational actors, a process that can be either pluralistic in addressing conflicting goals or reasonable by prioritizing effectiveness and efficiency through obligatory passage points.

In this context, the topic of governance is a recurring issue in the politics of entrepreneurship, with academics increasingly focussing on models of power as they look at relationships among

stakeholders (Dannreuther and Perren 2014). Governance generates the policies that play a vital role in establishing a favourable atmosphere for entrepreneurship (Spigel and Harrison 2018). However, as pointed out by Stam (2015), governmental interventions can also impose significant limitations on entrepreneurship policy. This impact is not necessarily advantageous, as it may guide entrepreneurs towards acts that result in dire socioeconomic consequences (Minniti 2008). While various forms of governmental assistance – such as financial backing, educational programmes, and access to specialized expertise – may promote entrepreneurship, it is essential to note that these policies alone are insufficient to create a thriving and sustainable ecosystem (McQuaid 2002). Consequently, the focus on policy discussions implies that governance will boost the economy by alleviating restrictions on entrepreneurship (Minniti, Bygrave, and Autio 2005). For this to work in practice, the role of the government has to change from leader to supporter (Feld 2020), something that can be challenging due to the loss of power that is perceived when transitioning from a post- totalitarian regime to a democratic market economy.

Our study's transitional and emergent economic context is a prime example of the ongoing clashes between the push for governance reforms to bring about transformation and the need to maintain established structures (Holmes et al. 2016). Change and interventions have the potential to enhance the economic prosperity and influence of individual actors but can also lead to inequalities and disrupt the overall ecosystem. More specifically, as evidence from Kazakhstan shows, the central role retained by governments in post-communist societies differs from inherent market economies, where entrepreneurial ecosystems are usually contextualized in research. At the same time, other stakeholders are trying to seize power in entrepreneurial ecosystems by engaging in politics that affect governance. Nevertheless, we still know little about the intersection of politics with governance in those business environments in which entrepreneurial ecosystems are relatively new. Therefore, before the institutionalization of any practices that would make the ecosystem stable and thriving can be achieved, it is crucial to prioritize politics and governance discourses aimed at achieving consensus. The lack of research in this direction led to the following sub-questions and themes used to build our initial first-order code for analysis:

(1) *What are the causes of politics in entrepreneurial ecosystems?* Themes: Power tensions, lack of clear vision, diverse interests, conflicting priorities, inexperienced stakeholders, uncertainty.
(2) *How do politics affect the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems in Kazakhstan?* Themes: Formulation of policies, implementation, bureaucracy, trust, individualism, corruption, activism, strategic alliances.
(3) *How can governance be facilitated in a politics-dominated entrepreneurial ecosystem?* Themes: leadership, norms and values, ideas, coordinative discourse, communicative discourse, negotiating, learning.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research context: the new creative entrepreneurial ecosystem in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, a former Soviet republic, is located in Central Asia. The diversity of its cultural heritage is represented by the many ethnic groups that make up the 19 million people living in the country, which, besides Kazakhs, comprise Russians, Tatars, Uzbeks, Azerbaijanis, Germans, Ukrainians, Poles, and many others (Kromidha et al. 2022). The unique institutional, cultural and geographic contextual factors related to its central geographic position and multiculturalism make Kazakhstan a representative of the whole Central Asian region. Traditionally, centralized politics has been shaping the transition of Kazakhstan from communism to a market economy with a strong focus on extractive industries and infrastructure (Seilov 2015). Although Kazakhstan has adapted its politics to the market economy, the situation in the region has remained volatile (Isaacs 2010). As a result, Kazakhstan remains a democracy in the making (Ibadildin and Pisareva 2020), despite the positive

effects of public participatory consultations (Knox and Janenova 2018) and e-government initiatives (Kuatova, Bekbasarova, and Abdrashev 2020) in this multicultural country. More recently, Kazakhstan has been looking more at entrepreneurship and alternative industries to diversify its economy and to secure jobs for its growing young population. This makes Kazakhstan a representative and unique case of entrepreneurial ecosystem creation, as its economy slowly shifts from extractive publicly owned industries to small businesses and services in a global and digital environment.

Due to a need to diversify the economy, create new jobs for the youth, and become more visible in the global landscape, Kazakhstan's entrepreneurship and creative industries have gained increasing attention (Altinay et al. 2021; Kromidha et al. 2022). The potential of creative industries for entrepreneurial diversification and national development in Kazakhstan is well recognized (Zhuparova, Kaliyeva, and Isatayeva 2020). Yet, as is the case across most former Soviet republics, the transition of creative actors and outputs towards a more global and entrepreneurial approach remains dependent on national and urban cultural policy (Kim and Comunian 2022). This not only draws attention to opportunities related to creative industries but also to the needs for better policy and practice coordination.

3.2. Methods and data for qualitative research

The work for this study was conducted between 2018 and 2023, building on four consecutive small grants given by the British Council to deliver entrepreneurial capabilities for creative young people, develop the creative industries, and assist entrepreneurial universities in Kazakhstan. The strong relationships developed over the years with local stakeholders from civil society, business, universities and the government in Kazakhstan enabled us to have a very good understanding of the entrepreneurial ecosystem development context and collect rich data. We secured ethical approval from the institutional review boards of the partner institutions in Kazakhstan.

By conducting semi-structured interviews with important stakeholders in Kazakhstan's entrepreneurial ecosystem, we aimed to examine the genesis of ideas, the mechanisms by which they gain or lose momentum via discursive exchanges among stakeholders, and the factors that impede or facilitate their progress through the country's governing authorities. Due to our study's exploratory nature and its aim to build a theoretical framework for entrepreneurial ecosystem development, we chose semi-structured interviews (Louise Barriball and While 1994) as the most appropriate research method. In May–June 2022, we conducted 25 in-depth interviews with various entrepreneurial ecosystem stakeholders in Kazakhstan. When selecting our respondents, we paid particular attention to their involvement with power and politics in the creation of a creative entrepreneurial ecosystem. As shown in Table 1, we divided the representatives of entrepreneurial ecosystem stakeholders into three groups:

The methodological suggestions relating to a combination of aesthetics and politics in research processes require researchers to engage ethnographically in entrepreneurial processes (Steyaert 2011). For this purpose, we developed a semi-structured interview guide based around the three sub-questions and themes of the institutional generative discourse approach introduced earlier. After piloting it with three local project partners in Kazakhstan, two independent colleagues who are not authors in this study revised it for clarity in the local context.

3.3. Research analysis and rigor

Our study combines deductive and inductive logics for thematic coding (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2008), starting with the literature for the initial research framework and continuing with the analysis of primary qualitative data for conceptual synthesis. Although the deductive logic rigour is often justified by the use of research conventions, the use of such templates only serves to support the reasoning rigour used to formulate the research questions, analyse the data, and present contributions (Harley and Cornelissen 2022). The challenges linked to reconciling multiple logics into

Table 1. Summary of interviewees.

Interviewee	Role and organization	Relationship to creative industries	Gender
10 enablers representing business hubs, marketplace, festivals, creative cluster, professional associations, educational programme, international NGO			
7	Mentor	University's centre of creative industries	Female
20	CEO	University's start-up incubators, IT	Male
3	Manager	Supporting international organization	Female
2	Coordinator	Supporting local organization	Female
15	CEO and founder	producing, craft and design	Female
1	Trainer	design, craft, mentoring	Female
4	Trainer	marketing, Creative Spark project	Male
9	Co-founder	music events & production house	Male
17	Co-founder	creative hub	Male
12	Manager	Contemporary culture events	Female
6 experts representing government, quasi-government and supporting local and international non-governmental organizations			
16	Employee	Local government creative industries	Male
22	Former director	Local government creative industries	Male
24	Marketing director	Banking and entrepreneurial finance	Male
25	Employee	Quasi-governmental organization for entrepreneurial support	Female
19	Deputy chairman of the board	Quasi-governmental organization	Male
13	Employee	Quasi-governmental organization	Male
9 creative entrepreneurs, owners or top-managers, with more than 5 years of experience in business and project management operating in theatre, events, PR, marketing and communication, film, e-learning, music and architecture creative industries.			
23	Table game developer	Fin-tech start up, Table games development	Male
18	Co-founder	events, music, NFT	Male
21	Serial entrepreneur	film, music	Female
11	Producer	music	Female
6	Actress	independent theatre	Female
14	Founder	architecture	Male
10	Co-founder	e-learning platform	Female
5	Founder	PR, digital, social	Female
8	Manager	marketing, communications	Female

generalizations and theory building in interpretivist studies make it important to ensure rigour in qualitative research (Gasson 2004). To address this challenge in practice, we applied the Gioia methodology for rigour in inductive qualitative research (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013), complementing it with a deductive layer as a starting point, as applied in previous research (Kromidha, Gannon, and Taheri 2021). To generate the first-order codes and concepts, we used key themes and concepts related to each research sub-question (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2008). We used such deductive codes, originating from the literature review, to inform the questions in the interview guide. During the analysis, new inductive codes emerged, and the original ones evolved into more complex expressions. To illustrate and provide a map of the first-order concepts represented by codes, we used a Sankey diagram generated with ATLAS.ti to visualize code co-occurrence (Friese 2012) and to show the relationships between codes (Figure 1).

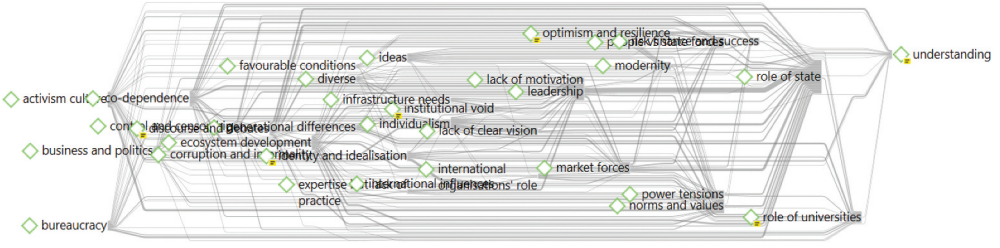

Figure 1. Sankey diagram of codes' co-occurrence relationships.

By applying the Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) methodology for qualitative research rigour, and an axial-coding logic (Williams and Moser 2019), we formed second-order themes from the first-order concepts (codes) as constructs in which deductive and inductive codes converged, enabling the emergence of new meanings and interpretations. The list of codes representing first order concepts is provided in Appendix A. Finally, the aggregate theoretical dimensions synthesized our study's theoretical contributions, which could be generalized and added to the broader body of knowledge through the final conceptual framework proposed in the discussion.

4. Findings

All stakeholders in Kazakhstan perceive the creative industries as an opportunity to diversify the economy from traditional extractive industries, engage and create opportunities for the youth as the country's population grows, and connect to the global digital economy and use it to promote cultural heritage, tourism, fashion, and, in doing so, the image of the country worldwide (Kim and Comunian 2022; Zhuparova, Kaliyeva, and Isatayeva 2020). This justifies the common interest in creating a creative entrepreneurial ecosystem, but also the emerging conflicts of politics, governance, and power, which require a careful look at discourse to generate sustainable institutional change. Yet, in a transitional democracy like Kazakhstan, the role played by state policies cannot be ignored (Isaacs 2010). Therefore, a hybrid model of a new entrepreneurial ecosystem in which the power discourses held among stakeholders inform policy and vice versa presents a unique research context.

4.1. Causes of entrepreneurial ecosystem politics

A degree of spontaneity in collaborations and partnerships – and in the way politics and governance are collaboratively designed – characterizes Kazakhstan's current creative industries entrepreneurial ecosystem (Zhuparova, Kaliyeva, and Isatayeva 2020). Most of our informants expressed the belief that true leadership and vision have hitherto been missing in the governance of a creative entrepreneurial ecosystem. More importantly, the country's weak legal and institutional frameworks are perceived as strong signs of a 'lack of enablers' or 'lack of supporting infrastructure' resulting in politics. Such a '*slippery environment*' (as one of the informants put it) causes the persistence of

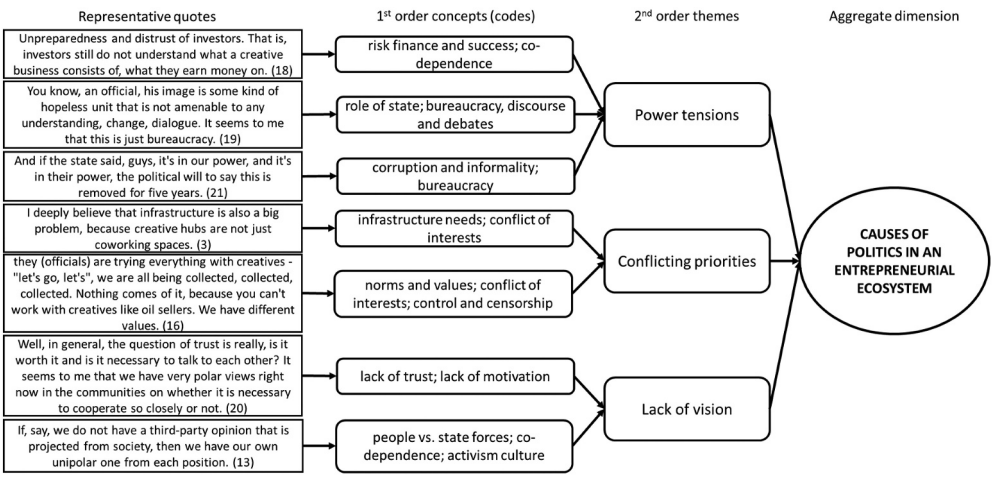

Figure 2. Causes of entrepreneurial ecosystem politics.

tensions between private entities and the state structures involved in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The root causes of the political and institutional discourses affecting it are shown in Figure 2.

When explored further, we found that the first cause of politics is the desire of each stakeholder – such as city councils, entrepreneurship associations, or public sector representatives – to take control of the entrepreneurial ecosystem that is growing around the creative industries in Kazakhstan. When asked about the reasons behind such a strong desire for different stakeholders to wield power, our informants pointed at the absence of a clear institutional framework suited to clarify the roles, responsibilities, and governance rules. In the use of politics, stakeholders see an opportunity to take advantage of this situation or to manipulate the existing rules, regulations, and laws according to their own interests. For example, as one of our respondents mentioned, the state structures – although still seen as leading actors – hold on to this position by not being '*amenable to any understanding, change, dialogue*' (19). Moreover, most of our informants expressed the view that the government was intervening too much into the governance of the ecosystem, over-regulating the existing systems and processes to maintain total control. Our respondents conveyed the persistence of a general feeling that policymakers and business actors from traditional industries failed to understand the meaning of the creative economy, creative sectors, creative entrepreneurship, and creative products that they were trying to control. This had led to the emergence of antagonizing views and to the stereotyping of power actors, with creative entrepreneurs being portrayed as wild and unreliable as business partners, and the government actors as rigid, corrupt, and controlling. The politics emerging as a result of such polarized views were found to require more institutional discourse to consider power as flowing, rather than as something to hold on to.

Second, in the new entrepreneurial ecosystem, conflicting priorities and misalignment of discourse and practice were found to constantly converge. As an interviewee stated, *'there is a conflict of priorities and a conflict of interest* [. . .] *at the level of state policy'* (16). One key area of conflicting interests pertained to the spaces, buildings, and infrastructure to be allocated to creative entrepreneurship. While traditional large firms and extractive industries were found to hold comfortable positions, owning properties and infrastructure in collaboration with the government while building the apartments and shopping centres needed for a growing population, our respondents reported a serious shortage, within city boundaries, of indoor spaces, buildings, hubs, and facilities for creative businesses and start-ups. For instance, more than 200 spaces were reported as being left unused or non-purposely used in the city of Almaty; many of these were state-owned but were not allocated to help the entrepreneurial ecosystem in need. Those properties that were available were reported to require enormous investment from entrepreneurs and gave no guarantee; besides, they were located in suburbs and far from main routes. The second – but equally important – source of conflicting interests was found to be related to differing values. While creative entrepreneurs would have liked their work to be known and shared and to make an impact that would give them fame, the state was reported to be more focussed on economic growth and employment. This conflict of priorities escalated beyond reconciliation through discourse in meetings when, as explained in an interview, state officials would steal someone else's success for their own political gain – for example, by using celebrities to build an attractive image of Kazakhstan and their own achievements. Conflicting priorities became evident as a cause of politics in relation to parties expressing their aims, while remaining unwilling to give what was needed to achieve them collaboratively, as explained in this quote: *'we are still talking about what we want to reduce: state participation, but it seems to be right there, and right here. There is a feeling that somewhere all is the same, leading to some kind of conflict' (5).*

The third cause of political and related institutional discourse was found to originate from a limited central and generally agreed vision. This was well captured in one of the informants' statements: '*everyone proceeds from completely different tasks of their own, their own vision, but this discussion about the ecosystem, by and large, does not sound right now on our market*' (3). Besides projecting an appearance of cohesion, short-term-targeted programmes were failing to secure any collaborative cohesion suited to deliver long-term outcomes and benefits. This was hindering the

ability to work together or cooperate at all. In great part, this was due to the constant government staff turnover, with positions being held, on average, for no more than 2 years. Consequently, the lack of vision and trust was found to originate from a lack of transparency, communication, and constructive institutional discourse among stakeholders, who continued to hold very polarized views about each other. Third-party opinions – such as those of international organizations – and a clearer focus on the benefits of the new creative entrepreneurial ecosystem for the people and society were reported to be often underrepresented in such debates. They could help towards the achievement of a more widespread common vision and understanding through participation in forums and discussions, giving voice to their ideas in institutional discourse, and occasionally making commitments if they perceived a shared interest and engagement.

4.2. The influence of politics on entrepreneurial ecosystem governance

We found that the inability of many stakeholders to acknowledge and understand each-other's roles and contributions to the ecosystem remained a major issue affecting the translation of politics into the governance of the creative entrepreneurship ecosystem. For example, many creative businesses we reported to claim that the current protocols did not fit the needs of the creative sectors, with officials needing formal papers to be handed down from the related ministries to start any development of specific programmes for the creative economy. Many of them were reported to confuse the creative economy with culture or art. While entrepreneurs were able to identify the significant players for their businesses, they were unable to connect them to each other as actors within a single ecosystem. In fact, we found that the term 'ecosystem' did not yet belong to the business vocabulary in Kazakhstan. By performing a more in-depth analysis, we identified the institutional voids, limited implementation, and ideological dysconnectivity issues, as shown in Figure 3.

Institutional voids were found to be directly related to the unclear, uncertain, and confusing environment found in Kazakhstan as the country was shifting its focus from the extractive sector to entrepreneurship and the creative industries. Starting with the legal framework, an interviewee explained that '*it is very important to ensure that legal regulation of this area is in place as soon as possible*' (5). Our respondents reported the persistence of difficulties in finding clear information about the ecosystem's rules, navigating the system to build new ventures or finding explanations in advance with an opportunity to correct any mistakes. Under such conditions, important non-governmental stakeholders – such as industry associations or financial institutions – were reported to be engaged in opportunistic

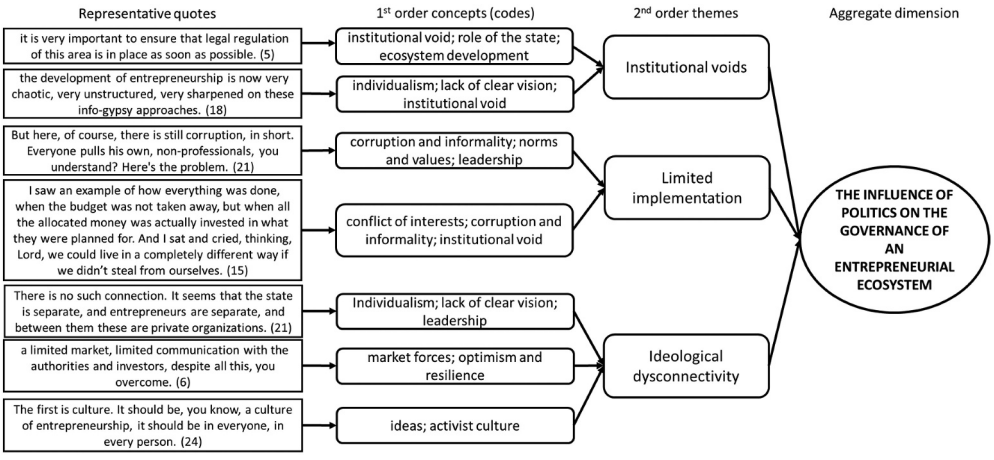

Figure 3. Influences of politics on entrepreneurial ecosystem governance.

behaviours in regard to the ecosystem while, at the same time, striving to avoid taking full responsibility and leadership roles, which they were leaving to the government. Expectations about the central role to be played by the state in filling any institutional gaps were being challenged by grassroot entrepreneurial initiatives. While the lack of a comprehensive legal framework for start-ups and small businesses was providing the flexibility needed for the ecosystem to evolve, in practice, the more powerful actors – such as the state and oligarchic traditional businesses – were the only ones who could really benefit from it. This situation was found to be discouraging creative entrepreneurs and small investors; in turn, the disengagement of powerful financial providers was found to be negatively affecting the legitimacy of the new creative entrepreneurship ecosystem.

We also found that politics among stakeholders was resulting in the poor and ineffective formulation and implementation of policies based on a clear difference between governance discourse and deliverables. While emphasizing the lack of formulation of policies, a respondent explained that '*there is not enough implementation. The project managers are the ones who should bring the projects to an end from A to Z. Here there are few of them*' (12). When we further investigated the reasons of such 'limited implementation', the informants representing the creative businesses made the key claim that the existing resources of the country were not being wisely used and allocated. Any efforts and resources were being spread too thinly, and leadership was often characterized by individualistic short-termism, rather than by a constructive discourse and efforts aimed at implementing a common vision. For example, in relation to traditional crafts, clothing and designs, but also music, the country had a comparative advantage in that the media – which remained tied to state and oligarch structures – was able to play an important role in promoting them and implementing any change required by the entrepreneurial ecosystem. For example, when talking about Dimash – a talented and well-known musician and creative entrepreneur from Kazakhstan – one of our interviewees said, '*it is by their living example that they are the best trigger. To show, probably, not to make a standard, but to show some examples all the time. And somehow elevate these people, give them the opportunity to report exactly in the media. These leaders need support*' (12). The informants affirmed that the government was focussing on selected projects in random sectors, rather than on developing coherent, cross-sectoral strategies and building ecosystems. Officials were reported to perceive the relationship with entrepreneurs primarily in terms of public procurement, considering them to be suppliers, while our respondents stated that entrepreneurs were viewed as being tied to government programmes and money as having the potential for serious risks and reputational damage.

We found that the ideological disconnect resulting partly from the polarized views the actors were reported to hold about each other, and partly from their culture, was limiting any discourse that could convert politics into governance. To bridge this gap and facilitate communication and dialogue, the government had created structures like the Atameken, something akin to a chamber of commerce for small businesses that operated as a quasi-governmental association, but also as an entrepreneurial one. In regard to the Atameken, an interviewee explained, '*they defend different interests and the state creates opportunities for, perhaps, such a dialogue. And, through this dialogue, they also participate, to a certain extent, in the development of entrepreneurship*' (16). Yet, the key problem inherent to the perception of ideology in the context of Kazakhstan was expressed in the following quote: '*in the hands of the state, ideology has always been culture*' (11). The interviewee went on to explain that, over the last 30 years, the state – with the help of cultural figures and cultural events – had promoted its own ideology as culture, which had caused confusion between the two concepts. To be heard, stakeholders thus needed their own ideological champions. While some experts mentioned Bagdat Mussin – the Minister of Digital Development, who has made Kazakhstan one of the fastest developing digital nations – no such state figure was reported to be promoting an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the creative industries. While waiting for policy change and stronger government commitments,

entrepreneurs were reported to only be able to refer to talented singers like Dimash to convey what success in the creative entrepreneurial ecosystem could look like.

4.3. Facilitating entrepreneurial ecosystem governance

The first two parts of our findings revealed that, regardless of some strong factors justifying their importance, politics remained disjointed from any governance with a clear vision for the management of the creative entrepreneurship ecosystem. This section of the findings presents new insights into the factors suited to facilitate the governance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Kazakhstan. In particular, this section highlights the importance of (i) achieving stakeholder collective learning through the creation of knowledge exchange platforms, (ii) creating a national and international sense of identity, and (iii) forming strategic alliances, as shown in Figure 4.

In the absence of efficient politics, the first facilitator of governance in an evolving creative entrepreneurship ecosystem involves providing stakeholders that share common interests with a stronger joint voice by means of the establishment of strategic alliances among them. Such alliances, while not necessarily formal, were explained by an interviewee: '*these are some kind of associations, this seems to be how they unite in some sort of partner holdings, not legal, but simple partnerships*' (8). In the absence of established institutional norms, stakeholders were relying on using political institutional discourse to build strategic alliances and co-dependencies. International organizations (British Council, US Consulate General, Chevron, Goethe Institute, USAID) were reported to play an important role in the field, helping creative entrepreneurs by trying to provide support to compensate for the infrastructural gaps or to fill the institutional gaps by introducing foreign practices and know-how. Regardless of such involvement, stakeholders were reported to generally expect the government, especially the mayor's offices (akimats), to lead regional alliances. In practice, this expectation will remain mostly unmet until the status of the creative industries is clarified and regulated. For the time being, strategic alliances for discourse leadership are the best tool at which most stakeholders can aim in order to impact governance policy-making.

The second facilitating factor we identified was the sense of local and international identity alignment that was emerging from groupings established in the creative industries. We found that, regardless of conflicting priorities, power tensions, or the lack of a common vision between the state structures and entrepreneurs, Kazakhstan's creative industry was going through a self-identification process. As mentioned in one of the interviews, this

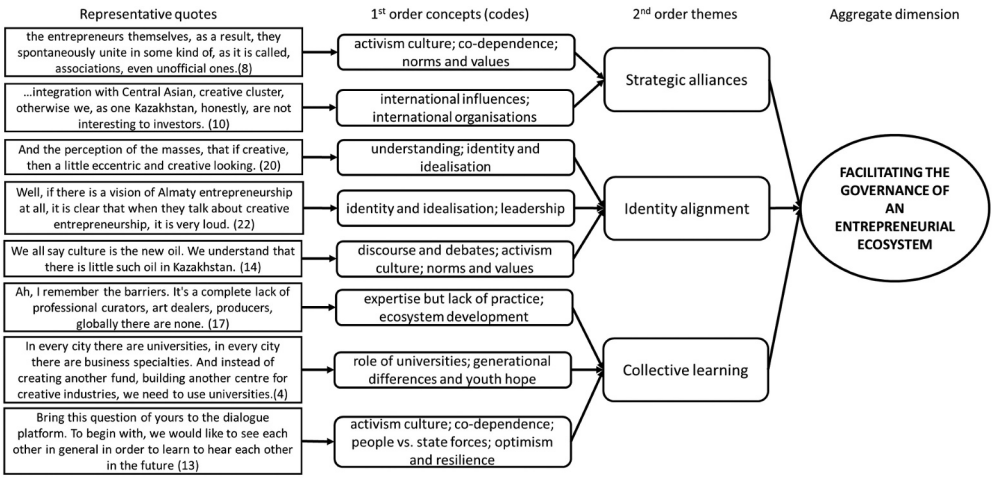

Figure 4. Facilitating entrepreneurial ecosystem governance.

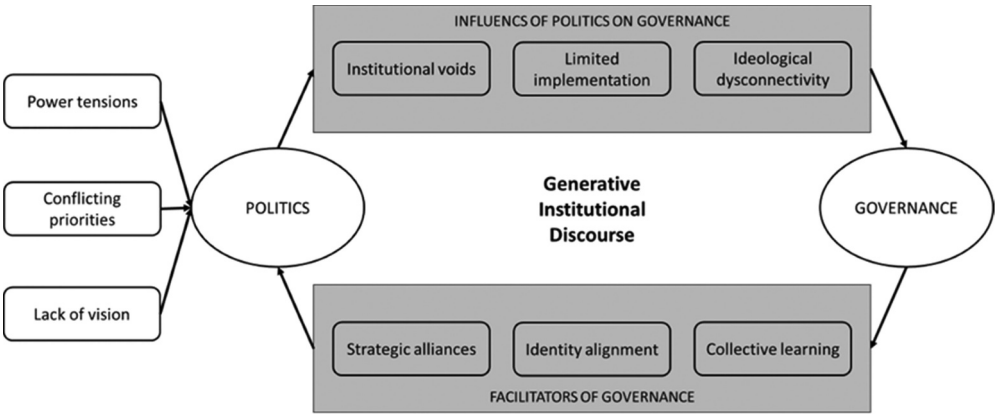

Figure 5. A generative institutional discourse framework of politics and governance.

identity alignment process originated from the people themselves '*there is such an initiative coming from below from people, connected with their own self-identification, national identity*' (6). We found that the centrality of their regional identity inspired in our respondents a sense of pride in their country despite the divisions of interests that seemed to be undermining the process of the creation of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. To establish a representative actor identity suited to engage in politics and governance, the creative industries would need to fight the widely shared stereotype – often still propagated in art schools and academies – that creative people are no good with money and unable to run their own businesses and honour commitments. Another factor contributing to this perception is the limited understanding held by stakeholders – such as banks or investment funds – of what the creative economy, creative sectors, creative entrepreneurship, and creative products mean, and of how to deal with them – even philanthropically – as suggested in the following quote: '*It's not about money, it's about the culture of philanthropy, that no one knows how, in fact, how to spend money on art, culture*' (12).

Finally, we found collective learning – as an important aspect of institutional generative discourse, as shown in Figure 5—being hindered by a clear lack of experts and professionals suited to lead and advance any institutional discourse around it. Most learning was reported as being self-taught, and new skills to be needed to develop the entrepreneurial mindset and its related business practices. Yet, the related mentors, facilitators, and experts were found to be widely missing. Universities were reported to be expected to be the main sites of creative and entrepreneurial innovation and natural bridges between all stakeholders; however, entrepreneurship, as a subject, was found to be quite new, and creative entrepreneurship to be viewed as rather exotic. It was interesting to find that creative entrepreneurship had been first introduced by the British Council's Creative Spark programme, which partly funded our study. However, many entrepreneurship courses were found to be still taught primarily by theorists who had never run their own businesses. Practitioners were reported to be avoiding any collaboration with universities because of the related bureaucracy and enormous volume of paperwork. The real learning that was reported to be happening was represented by collective emerging collaborations, discourse, and practice. In this regard, an interviewee explained '*we decided to unite somehow and grow together, as was said at the last Collective learning forum, we created this association of university business incubators and accelerator*' (9). In this experiential and generally informal context, learning was found to serve to familiarize stakeholders with entrepreneurship concepts and, more importantly, to make them more receptive towards each other. As explained in one of the interviews, the path to achieving this goal should start with the different

stakeholders giving greater consideration to each other's views: '*we would like to see each other in general in order to learn to hear each other in the future*' (13). Uncovering synergies in the diversity of working together would help stakeholders build the creative entrepreneurial ecosystem they all want.

5. Discussion

5.1. Research implications

The existing literature on entrepreneurial ecosystems has mostly involved multidisciplinary research, leaving a gap in conceptual theorization and in the principles governing the evolution that shapes entrepreneurial ecosystems. Our knowledge remains particularly limited to post-communist market economies, in which entrepreneurial ecosystems are viewed as promising opportunities to provide employment for a growing global youth looking beyond the traditional extractive industries. Our findings confirm that, during such transitions, politics between government actors and institutions used to be in control, with entrepreneurs seeking attention and other stakeholders influencing the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems, particularly in countries with inadequate institutions and rule of law.

As shown in Figure 5, we propose the institutional generative discourse as a mechanism of entrepreneurial ecosystem politics, whereby ideas are aligned through stakeholder commitment and governance collaboration, which evolve through opportunism and learning.

With this study, we offer new insights into the intersection of politics and governance dynamics and into the conception and formation stages of entrepreneurial ecosystems (see Figure 5). We identified power tensions, conflicting priorities, and a lack of vision as the main causes of politics in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These findings are in line with those of Belitski, Grigore, and Bratu (2021). In our research, we went further and explored the influence of these factors on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystem. By doing so, we found empirical support to the findings of Kromidha (2017), who stated that the effective governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems could lead to political tensions, power struggles, and the inefficient use of resources. Our research findings go beyond those of Kromidha (2017) by identifying a lack of clear policy formulation and implementation, as well as ideological disconnect, as the main political influences on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. When a balance is warranted between entrepreneurs and governance in resource allocation (power) and collaborations and partnerships (politics), these dynamics can improve an ecosystem's capability. Success stories can help remedy any ideological disconnect, enabling more individuals with expertise and professional backgrounds to contribute to the development of a dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem. Yet, a successful ecosystem requires a good degree of discursive and physical centrality. In that regard, cities with an existing ecosystem or expertise, such as Almaty, can become hubs for creative entrepreneurship, increasing their political discourse power in relation to requesting and building the necessary infrastructure and offer a sense of institutional stability to local, international, or digital actors.

By drawing attention to collective learning – as a process that involves knowledge, experts, and organizations interacting with each other – our study provides a better understanding of the origin and nature of the ideas that discursive institutionalism takes for granted (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016; Kromidha and Córdoba-Pachón 2017; Schmidt 2008). We showed that collective learning is an important top-down process that occurs between strategic alliances and that identity alignment is a bottom-up phenomenon. Our study shows how, for these to take place, the role of the government can change from that of leader to that of feeder (Feld, 2020), becoming more receptive and enabling more institutional generative discourse to emerge and be heard from other entrepreneurial ecosystem stakeholders. Instead of assuming a dominant role as a discourse leader and decision-maker in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, the government can offer state support for resource allocation in order to create dependencies for inclusion.

As depicted in Figure 5, our findings demonstrate that the relationship between politics and governance depends on the alignment of strategic alliances with the identity of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Our study adds to the literature on the important role played by rules aimed at improving the collaboration between governments and stakeholders when they are used as supportive mechanisms in the ecosystem. While the literature did show that both network connections and business infrastructure are needed (Smith and Lohrke 2008) to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem, where such work should start remained unclear. Examining the political and governance discourses, our findings argue against the ability of an ecosystem to consistently generate high-growth entrepreneurial companies by itself (Spigel and Harrison 2018). We show that commitments to a physical infrastructure and to an agreed long-term vision should be carried out in parallel. In their absence, the tensions between politics and governance, as presented in this study, act as a generative discourse between individual short-term opportunism and the greater good that can be generated from building something together.

By examining the involvement of governments and entrepreneurs in the exchange of ideas and the establishment of procedures, our framework shows how a generative institutional discourse is suited to enable governance to inform politics. This responds to the calls made in regard to redesigning the 'rules of the game', whereby entrepreneurs and governments are encouraged to engage in close collaboration (Belitski, Grigore, and Bratu 2021). In addition, our study also reflects on the consequences of politics and governance for the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Evidence from Kazakhstan highlights a noticeable need for a new form of leadership that is consensual, open, and transparent, but also not afraid to take responsibilities and be consistent in following a jointly agreed vision. Structurally, an entrepreneurial ecosystem should be clearly understood as an institutionalized space in which actors, interests, and ideas connect and converge in a generative process. This does not exclude the acknowledgement of hierarchies, roles, and power, as long as they serve the ecosystem as a separate identity and not as individual interests. In order to foster self-sustaining growth and innovation within an ecosystem, it is imperative to prioritize education, mentoring, knowledge support, and trust among all stakeholders. This is vital in increasing stakeholder knowledge and awareness through a business, governance, and policy discourse that involves higher education institutions. These findings are in line with those of previous research (Etzkowitz and Zhou 2017) in arguing the importance of combined perspectives from businesses, the government, and higher education institutions to develop entrepreneurial ecosystems. This approach ensures that ecosystems can advance and flourish collectively.

6. Conclusions and directions for future research

Previous entrepreneurship literature neglects the investigation of the interface between politics and the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Daniel et al. 2022; Wurth, Stam, and Spigel 2022). This is surprising given that politics affects the functioning of organizations, destinations, and countries (Daniel et al. 2022; Wurth, Stam, and Spigel 2022). This study responds to the emergence of this research gap by utilizing discursive institutionalism theory in order to investigate the causes of politics, and the influence of politics on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystem in a developing country context. The study also presents empirical insights into how different factors facilitate the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems in a developing country.

Drawing on the discursive institutionalism theory, we produced a framework for entrepreneurial ecosystem governance considering aggregated dimensions, namely, causes of politics (power tension, conflicting priorities, and lack of vision), the influence of politics on governance (institutional voids, limited formulation and implementation of policies, ideological dysconnectivity), facilitators of governance (strategic alliances, identity alignment and collective learning). This framework brings together two theoretical constructs, namely, politics and governance, and offers new insights into our understanding of the political complexities of the governance of an entrepreneurial ecosystem. It also reveals how the conflicting and contrasting expectations and interests of different stakeholders,

power tensions, and the lack of a clear vision create political tensions in the governance of the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These all lead to poor functioning of the entrepreneurial ecosystem due to institutional voids, poor formulation and implementation of the policies, and ideological disconnectivity. Our framework advocates that governance can be facilitated through strategic alliances, identity alignment and collective learning.

Our results have paved the way for new directions in entrepreneurship research, notably the mechanisms that influence the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Future research could explore other factors in more depth, including leadership, bureaucracy, lack of trust in the government, the interface between these different factors and their influence on the governance of entrepreneurial ecosystems. In particular, our study holds significant potential in guiding future researchers through the concept of generative institutional discourse. This theory has potential implications for future research in elucidating the pivotal position that stakeholders may assume in the generation, configuration, and dissemination of ideas for the evolution of an entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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Appendix A. List of codes and their groundedness in descending order

	Code	Grounded
1	activism culture	28
2	bureaucracy	20
3	business and politics	16
4	co-dependence	24
5	control and censorship	12
6	corruption and informality	25
7	discourse and debates	24
8	diverse	16
9	ecosystem development	34
10	expertise but lack of practice	15
11	favourable conditions	13
12	generational differences	15
13	ideas	95
14	identity and idealization	30
15	individualism	36
16	infrastructure needs	15
17	institutional void	20
18	international influences	30
19	international organizations' role	18
20	lack of clear vision	17
21	lack of motivation	15
22	leadership	39
23	market forces	33
24	modernity	13
25	norms and values	25
26	optimism and resilience	17
27	people vs state forces	15
28	power tensions	24
29	risk finance and success	21
30	role of state	51
31	role of universities	25
32	understanding	14