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## TRUST, MERIT, AND REFORM: HOW YOUNG CIVIL SERVANTS PERCEIVE KAZAKHSTAN'S PRESIDENTIAL YOUTH PERSONNEL RESERVE

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**ABSTRACT.** This article investigates the perceived legitimacy and institutional credibility of Kazakhstan's Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve (PYPR), a flagship meritocratic initiative aimed at accelerating bureaucratic renewal through the competitive promotion of civil servants under 35. Drawing on a nationwide survey conducted during the program's fourth application cycle in June 2025, the study analyzes how eligible public officials assess the fairness, accessibility, and impact of the PYPR in the context of hybrid governance. While state discourse frames the program as a modernizing reform, our findings suggest a disjuncture between rhetorical endorsement and behavioral engagement. Although more than 77% of respondents expressed willingness to recommend the program, only 25.3% intended to apply themselves, indicating a symbolic-behavioral gap. Perceptions of informational opacity, limited career visibility for prior participants, and persistent informal hierarchies contribute to cautious ambivalence. These dynamics reflect broader patterns of symbolic compliance and institutional decoupling as theorized by Meyer and Rowan (1977) and Schedler (2002). Trust in merit-based reform appears not only institutionally contingent but also narratively constructed—shaped by perceptions of fairness, transparency, and narrative inclusion. The study concludes that the long-term viability of the PYPR depends on the state's ability to convert symbolic legitimacy into lived bureaucratic trust, particularly among local-level civil servants. By foregrounding bottom-up perceptions within a top-down reform initiative, the article contributes to ongoing scholarship on bureaucratic modernization, elite reproduction, and the challenges of institutional renewal in transitional political systems.

**KEYWORDS:** Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve, civil service, public administration, meritocracy, bureaucratic reform, institutional legitimacy.

## Доверие, меритократия и реформа: как молодые государственные служащие воспринимают Президентский молодежный кадровый резерв Казахстана

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**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Данная статья исследует восприятие легитимности и институционального доверия к Президентскому молодежному кадровому резерву (ПМКР) Казахстана — флагманской меритократической инициативе, направленной на обновление бюрократии посредством конкурсного отбора государственных служащих до 35 лет. На основе данных национального опроса, проведенного в июне 2025 года в рамках четвертого набора программы, анализируются мнения молодых чиновников о справедливости, доступности и влиянии ПМКР в условиях гибридного государственного управления. Несмотря на официальную риторику модернизации, результаты указывают на разрыв между декларируемой поддержкой и реальным участием: более 77% опрошенных готовы рекомендовать программу, но лишь 25,3% намерены подать заявку. Причинами такой сдержанности выступают информационная непрозрачность, слабая карьерная видимость предыдущих участников и устойчивость неформальных иерархий. Эти явления интерпретируются через призму теорий символического соответствия и институционального расхождения. Доверие к меритократическим реформам зависит не только от институтов, но и от нарратива — представлений о справедливости, прозрачности и включенности. Статья делает вывод, что долгосрочный успех ПМКР зависит от способности государства превратить символическую легитимность в реальное бюрократическое доверие, особенно на местном уровне. Таким образом, работа вносит вклад в исследование модернизации госаппарата, воспроизводства элит и вызовов институционального обновления в условиях переходных политических систем.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** Президентский молодежный кадровый резерв, государственная служба, государственное управление, меритократия, бюрократическая реформа, институциональная легитимность.

## Сенім, меритократия және реформа: Қазақстанның Президенттік жастар кадрлық резервін жас мемлекеттік қызметшілер қалай бағалайды

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**АНДАТПА.** Бұл мақала Қазақстанның Президенттік Жастар Кадрлық Резервінің (ПЖКР) заңдылық қабылдануы мен институционалдық сенімділігіне қатысты мемлекеттік қызметшілердің көзқарастарын зерттейді. Мақала 2025 жылғы маусымда өткізілген төртінші іріктеу на-уқаны кезінде жүргізілген бүкілқазақстандық сауалнама деректеріне негізделген. Зерттеу ПЖКР-дың әділдігі, қолжетімділігі және ықпалы туралы азаматтық қызметшілердің пікірлерін талдайды. Мемлекеттік дискурста бұл бағдарлама жаңғырту құралы ретінде ұсынылғанымен, зерттеу нәтижелері риторикалық қолдаудың нақты іс-әрекетпен сәйкеспейтінін көрсетеді. Респонденттердің 77%-дан астамы бағдарлама-ны басқаларға ұсынуға дайын екенін білдіргенімен, тек 25,3%-ы өздері қатысуға ниетті. Бұл сенім мен мінез-құлық арасындағы алшақтықты көрсетеді. Ақпараттың жабықтығы, алдыңғы қатысушылардың мансаптық жетістігінің аздығы және бейресми иерархиялардың сақталуы сенімсіздікті тудырады. Мақалада бұл құбылыстар символдық сәйкестік пен институционалдық алшақтық теорияларымен түсіндіріледі. Меритократиялық реформаларға деген сенім институционалдық жағдайға ғана емес, сонымен қатар әділдік, ашықтық және инклюзия туралы қалыптасқан нарративке де байланысты. ПЖКР-дың ұзақ мерзімді тиімділігі мемлекеттік қызметтің төменгі буындарындағы сенімді нақты әрекетке айналдыра алу қабілетіне байланысты. Мақала жоғарыдан төменге бағытталған реформа аясында төменгі деңгейдегі қа-былдауларға назар аудара отырып, өтпелі кезеңдегі саяси жүйелердегі институционалдық жаңғырту мәселелеріне үлес қосады.

**ТҮЙІН СӨЗДЕР:** Президенттік жастар кадрлық резерві, мемлекеттік қызмет, мемлекеттік басқару, меритократия, бюрократиялық ре-форма, институционалдық легитимдік.

**INTRODUCTION.** Efforts to rejuvenate public admin-istration through selective talent programs have become increasingly prominent in recent decades. Across political systems that combine formal democratic institutions with strong executive authority, governments have promoted these initiatives as visible signs of modernization, inclu-siveness, and meritocracy. Such programs are typically de-signed to expand access for younger professionals and to create opportunities for the emergence of reform-mind-ed bureaucratic elites. Yet comparative scholarship shows that in hybrid regimes—where electoral mechanisms co-exist with concentrated executive power—these reforms often carry a dual logic. On the one hand, they symbolize adherence to global norms of transparency and fairness; on the other, they risk reinforcing entrenched hierarchies and sustaining informal gatekeeping practices. Whether talent-based initiatives in hybrid regimes produce sub-stantive reform or operate primarily as symbolic gestures remains an unresolved question with both theoretical and policy significance.

Kazakhstan offers a timely and revealing case through which to investigate these dynamics. Since independence in 1991, successive governments have launched multiple waves of administrative reform, each framed as a step toward greater efficiency, transparency, and profession-alism. Policy documents consistently highlight alignment with international governance standards, including mer-it-based recruitment and depoliticized career advance-ment. Despite this rhetoric, structural characteristics of the administrative system remain deeply entrenched. Vertical mobility is often mediated by informal patronage networks, high-level appointments remain tied to political loyalty, and career pathways are shaped only partially by formal procedures. It is within this context that the Pres-idential Youth Personnel Reserve (PYPR) was launched in 2019 as a flagship initiative of administrative moderniza-tion. The PYPR seeks to identify citizens under the age of 35 with higher education credentials through an open competition and to incorporate them into the state’s lead-ership pipeline. As of mid-2025, three selection rounds had been completed, and a fourth intake was launched on June 1 of that year. Policymakers have consistently pre-sented the PYPR as evidence of Kazakhstan’s commitment to generational renewal and institutional modernization.

Despite its visibility, scholarly and policy debate has paid limited attention to how the PYPR is perceived by the population it directly targets. Existing work on post-Soviet administrative reform has concentrated primarily on the formal design of institutions or on elite discourses surrounding governance innovation. The perspectives of rank-and-file bureaucrats—particularly those under 35,

who constitute both the target group and potential bene-ficiaries—have been left underexplored. Yet these percep-tions are crucial. The success of reforms depends not only on legal design or political will but also on whether young civil servants view such programs as credible avenues for professional advancement or dismiss them as symbolic exercises with little tangible return.

To address this gap, we conducted an original nation-wide survey of civil servants under the age of 35 ( $n = 687$ ) during the June 1–July 1, 2025 application window. Invitations were distributed through the state’s e-Otinish electronic notification system, ensuring that all formally eligible officials received equal opportunity to participate, regardless of region or administrative tier. The timing of the survey is analytically significant: by collecting respons-es during the active intake period, we capture perceptions at the precise moment when application decisions were being considered. This design reduces recall bias and generates a unique snapshot of attitudes as they unfold in real time.

The survey results highlight a paradox. On the one hand, 77 percent of respondents indicated that they would recommend the PYPR to their peers, with 61.3 per-cent providing an unqualified endorsement and an addi-tional segment offering conditional support. On the oth-er hand, only 25.3 percent reported willingness to apply themselves. We conceptualize this as a symbolic–behavio-ral gap. Symbolically, the program enjoys strong legitima-cy and is perceived as an attractive initiative in principle. Behaviorally, however, most eligible officials remain reluc-tant to participate. This gap raises fundamental questions about whether the PYPR functions as a substantive career pathway or primarily as a symbolic mechanism aligned with international governance norms.

Our theoretical framing builds on three complemen-tary strands of institutional analysis. The first is the litera-ture on symbolic compliance, which argues that political actors often adopt reforms to satisfy external audiences and reinforce legitimacy, even when underlying practic-es remain unchanged [1]. The second is the concept of institutional decoupling, rooted in organizational institu-tionalism, which highlights how organizations adopt for-mal structures that appear consistent with global mod-els but remain loosely connected to actual behavior [2]. The third concerns elite reproduction under constrained pluralism, which demonstrates how formally meritocratic procedures are often filtered through entrenched practic-es of clientelism, favoritism, and opaque decision-making, thereby limiting their transformative potential [3]. While analytically distinct, these perspectives converge on the expectation that reforms in hybrid regimes frequently

generate symbolic legitimacy without corresponding behavioral transformation. By applying this lens to the PYPR, we can examine whether the observed symbolic-behavioral gap reflects these broader dynamics.

Based on this framework, the article addresses four interrelated research questions:

1) To what extent do young civil servants perceive the PYPR as a fair and accessible mechanism for career advancement?

2) What demographic, institutional, or experiential factors shape willingness to participate in the 2025 intake?

3) How do perceptions of transparency and procedural legitimacy vary across subgroups, such as central versus local administration, graduates of foreign versus domestic universities, and men versus women?

4) Do these patterns indicate that the PYPR constitutes substantive reform, or do they reinforce the hypothesis of symbolic institutionalism?

The contributions of this article are threefold. Empirically, it presents the first within-intake survey of young civil servants' perceptions of the PYPR, providing real-time evidence of attitudes toward a flagship administrative reform. Theoretically, it operationalizes the concept of decoupling by measuring the distance between symbolic endorsement (willingness to recommend) and behavioral intent (willingness to apply), thereby grounding abstract debates in systematic evidence. Policy-wise, it identifies concrete conditions under which such programs can move beyond symbolism: transparent reporting on subsequent appointments, demonstrable career outcomes for reserve members, and targeted outreach to reduce disparities between central and local administrations.

More broadly, this study contributes to comparative public administration by illustrating the internal limits of reform-driven legitimacy in hybrid regimes. It shows how new institutional designs interact with historically embedded structures, and how young professionals interpret the tension between meritocratic ideals and constrained opportunities. Symbolic programs may generate enthusiasm in principle, but unless they yield visible career mobility, they risk deepening cynicism among the very cohorts they are intended to empower. These insights are not unique to Kazakhstan: similar youth-focused initiatives exist across post-Soviet and other hybrid contexts, making the case both regionally relevant and globally significant.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the literature on symbolic reforms, institutional decoupling, and elite reproduction, situating the PYPR within these debates. The methods section then outlines the survey design, sampling strategy, and measurement of key constructs. The results section presents descriptive findings and regression analyses that link perceptions of fairness and transparency to actual application behavior. The discussion interprets these results in light of Kazakhstan's administrative field and the broader dynamics of hybrid regimes. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the implications for sustaining legitimacy through reform and identifies avenues for future research, including comparative extensions across other hybrid and authoritarian settings.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS.** Efforts to modernize bureaucracies through youth-targeted recruitment programs have become a recurrent feature of authoritarian and hybrid regimes, often justified in the rhetoric of meritocracy, transparency, and generational renewal. Yet beyond their formal aims, such initiatives carry significant political and symbolic weight. In governance contexts marked by entrenched elite networks, understanding whether these programs generate substantive institutional change or merely reproduce existing hierarchies

requires more than descriptive analysis; it calls for theoretical scrutiny and comparative insight. Recent scholarship underscores that reforms presented as inclusive may operate as performative acts, designed to display modernization while leaving informal power structures largely intact [1, 2].

Kazakhstan's Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve (PYPR), launched in 2019, exemplifies what Pollitt and Bouckaert [4] describe as a competitive elite access reform: a selective mechanism that purports to broaden access to strategic leadership roles through transparent competition. Similar initiatives are observable across the Global East, but their long-term consequences remain uncertain, especially in contexts where formal institutions are frequently decoupled from substantive authority. The distinction between institutional form and practice, emphasized by Meyer and Rowan's [2] notion of decoupling, remains salient in the post-Soviet region. Here, reforms are often codified in regulatory frameworks yet undermined by persistent patronage, informal vetting, and political discretion [5]. These dynamics raise a key question: to what extent can youth-focused reforms be seen as credible openings, rather than symbolic instruments of elite reproduction?

The literature on symbolic compliance provides a critical framework for interpreting such reforms. As Schedler [1] argued, authoritarian elites frequently adopt policies that mimic global norms of accountability and inclusivity while minimizing disruption to the prevailing order. More recent studies confirm that in post-Soviet regimes, modernization-oriented reforms are frequently layered onto entrenched governance structures, producing a veneer of openness without altering informal hierarchies. Importantly, however, this symbolic turn should not be reduced to pure manipulation. As Mahoney and Thelen [6] and Streeck and Thelen [7] note, institutions established initially as tactical facades may, over time, create new expectations, social pressures, and trajectories of gradual change. This ambivalence—between symbolic performance and latent institutionalization—is central to evaluating the PYPR.

Comparative evidence further highlights the tension between rhetoric and practice. Russia's Presidential Talent Pool, introduced during Medvedev's presidency, was celebrated as a technocratic innovation, but studies revealed that actual appointments were filtered through loyalty networks and political discretion rather than transparent criteria [8]. Similarly, in China, the Communist Youth League pathway has long been presented as a meritocratic ladder, yet its operation increasingly prioritizes ideological alignment and factional loyalty over professional capacity [9]. In both cases, youth recruitment initiatives advertised as competitive mechanisms have reinforced political closure rather than disrupted it. Against this backdrop, Kazakhstan's PYPR appears less as a novel breakthrough than as part of a regional pattern of symbolic elite renewal.

Yet to portray these programs solely as manipulative façades risks oversimplification. Several scholars caution that symbolic reforms can unintentionally generate institutional effects. For example, professional communities, international donors, and even participants themselves may begin to hold states accountable for the standards they proclaim. Repeated cycles of symbolic compliance may thus crystallize into incremental institutionalization, even if such change emerges slowly and unevenly. In Kazakhstan's case, the fact that the PYPR has completed three selection rounds and entered its fourth cycle in 2025 indicates some degree of institutional consolidation, even if its substantive outcomes remain underexplored. This

tension between performativity and incremental change has not been sufficiently addressed in the existing literature on Central Asian governance.

A further limitation of current research is its neglect of subjective perception. While studies of Kazakhstan's administrative reforms have emphasized performance management, e-government, and anti-corruption, they rarely examine how youth perceive initiatives like the PYPR. Yet the literature on bureaucratic legitimacy emphasizes that perceived fairness, accessibility, and trust are essential for the credibility of merit-based reforms [9]. More recent studies confirm that even procedurally robust reforms may fail to achieve legitimacy if citizens view them as inaccessible, symbolic, or predetermined [3, 10]. This gap is particularly critical in hybrid regimes, where bureaucratic insulation is weak and informal norms often overshadow formal rules.

In this light, the PYPR offers a test case for competing theoretical claims. On one hand, it may represent a performative tool for sustaining elite cohesion while satisfying international and domestic demands for modernization. On the other hand, the program could evolve into a mechanism that—however imperfectly—reshapes expectations about access, fairness, and professional competence. What remains absent from the literature is empirical evidence of how young civil servants themselves interpret the PYPR: whether they see it as a credible channel for career advancement or dismiss it as yet another symbolic gesture. Addressing this question not only fills a critical gap in Kazakhstan's administrative studies but also contributes to broader debates on the layered nature of institutional reform in hybrid regimes. By situating the PYPR within intersecting literatures on symbolic reform, elite reproduction, and institutional perception, this study evaluates whether youth recruitment can function as a site of meaningful bureaucratic inclusion, or whether it merely reproduces the paradoxes of authoritarian modernization.

**Methodology.** This study investigates how young civil servants in Kazakhstan perceive the PYPR, with a focus on whether they view it as an opportunity for professional advancement or as a symbolic gesture of state communication. The research adopts a cross-sectional survey design, which is widely applied in social science to capture attitudinal data at a single point in time. The survey targeted public officials aged 35 and under, corresponding precisely to the eligibility requirements of the PYPR program. Data collection was carried out between 1 June and 1 July 2025, coinciding with the official launch of the program's fourth national intake. This timing allowed perceptions to be captured during a politically salient moment, which increases the contextual validity of responses.

The invitation was distributed via the state-authorized e-Otinish platform, ensuring both legal traceability and broad institutional coverage. To reduce social desirability bias, responses were collected anonymously through Google Forms. This approach ensured that all invitees were active civil servants and provided broad institutional coverage across ministries, regional akimats, and municipal administrations. A total of 687 valid responses were received. Participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, age, education, tenure, and job level, which contributes to the external validity of the findings. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that civil servants without stable internet access may be underrepresented.

The questionnaire included 28 items, grouped into demographic, institutional, and attitudinal components. Outcome variables were designed to measure three domains: perceptions of procedural fairness in the selection process, trust in the PYPR's ability to identify competent leaders, and individual willingness to apply to the 2025

intake. For example, respondents were asked to assess whether they believed the process was based on merit rather than personal connections, to evaluate the likelihood that the program recruits competent professionals, and to indicate their own intention to apply. Attitudes were captured primarily through Likert-type scales, while willingness to apply was measured as a binary response. Symbolic perceptions were also assessed through agreement with the statement that the PYPR is "more of a political gesture than a substantive reform." These constructs draw on the literature on institutional trust and legitimacy [2].

Explanatory variables included demographic characteristics (gender, age, level of education, experience of foreign study), institutional affiliation (central versus local government), years of civil service experience, and job role (executive versus managerial). These variables were selected based on their theoretical relevance to patterns of institutional trust and elite recruitment. To ensure reliability, the attitudinal blocks were tested for internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging between 0.74 and 0.82, exceeding the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70 [11].

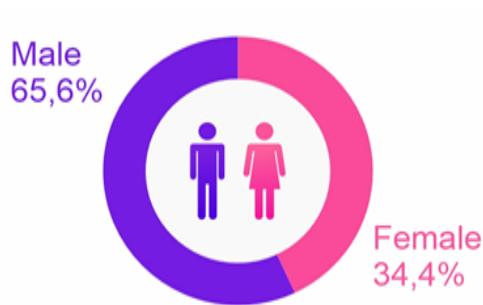
The analysis proceeded in three steps. First, descriptive statistics were used to profile the respondent pool and summarize general patterns. Second, bivariate tests such as t-tests, chi-square tests, and ANOVA were applied to explore subgroup differences, for example whether perceptions of fairness varied by institutional affiliation or seniority. Finally, regression models were estimated to identify predictors of perceived fairness and willingness to apply. Logistic regression was employed for binary outcomes, while OLS regression was used for continuous indicators. Core models included trust in the program, perceptions of fairness, job level, and years of experience as explanatory variables. Standard diagnostics were applied to check multicollinearity, normality of residuals, and robustness of estimates. Statistical analysis was conducted in Python 3.11 [13] using pandas, statsmodels, and matplotlib libraries [14].

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design prevents assessment of attitudinal change over time. Despite anonymity, some respondents may have self-censored due to political sensitivity. These constraints are typical in studies of governance in hybrid regimes, but they do not negate the value of the dataset, which provides a rare and timely insight into how a flagship state reform is interpreted by its target group.

**RESULTS AND THEIR DISCUSSION.** This section presents empirical findings from the nationwide survey of civil servants eligible for the 2025 intake of the PYPR. Results are organized thematically, beginning with demographic characteristics of respondents and followed by attitudinal and perceptual indicators related to the program's fairness, accessibility, competitiveness, and legitimacy.

The analysis is structured across key independent variables—gender, age, educational background, institutional affiliation, job position, years of service, and program awareness. These categories are examined both descriptively and inferentially to identify patterns of trust, skepticism, and engagement with the PYPR. Where appropriate, statistically significant differences across subgroups are highlighted to underscore the heterogeneity of reform perceptions within the young civil service cohort.

1) **GENDER DISTRIBUTION.** The gender distribution of survey participants reflects a notable skew toward male representation in Kazakhstan's public administration under the age of 35. Out of 687 respondents, 65.6% identified as male and 34.4% as female (see Figure 1). This two-to-one ratio underscores a persistent gender imbalance in the younger echelon of the state apparatus, despite the formal neutrality of the recruitment criteria.



**Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Survey Respondents.**

*\*Note. Compiled by the authors based on a national survey of 687 Kazakhstani civil servants conducted in June 1–July 1 2025*

Importantly, such asymmetry may not only reflect pipeline effects from educational or early-career stages but could also have implications for how merit-based programs like the PYPR are perceived and accessed. Previous research on public sector gender dynamics suggests that male-dominated institutional environments may reproduce informal selection norms and reduce the visibility or encouragement of female candidates [15, 16].

Further analysis of attitudinal responses indicates that female respondents, while fewer in number, were slightly more likely to express doubts about the procedural fairness of the PYPR—although this difference was not statistically significant ( $p > 0.1$ ). This pattern could point to deeper concerns about structural inclusivity, which are not directly addressed by the formal design of the PYPR.

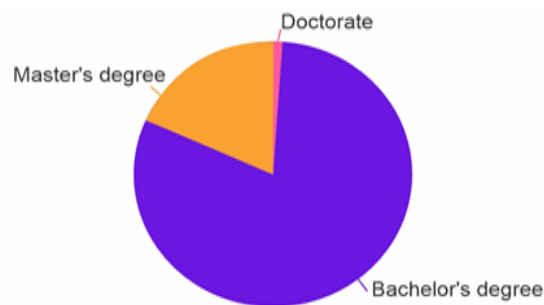
Thus, while gender is not a significant predictor of application intention in our regression models, the underlying distribution raises normative concerns about representational balance and the symbolic legitimacy of the program as a nationwide reform instrument.

2) EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND. The educational profile of respondents is dominated by individuals with bachelor's degrees, comprising 83.1% of the sample. A further 15.3% hold master's degrees, while only 1.6% possess doctoral (PhD) qualifications (see Figure 2). This distribution closely mirrors the structural composition of Kazakhstan's civil service pipeline, where undergraduate credentials remain the normative threshold for entry-level and mid-tier bureaucratic positions.

The relative scarcity of advanced academic degrees—especially at the doctoral level—raises normative questions about the depth of analytical training and evidence-based governance capacity among the emerging cohort of public officials. While the PYPR formally emphasizes merit and leadership potential, the overwhelming reliance on bachelor's-level qualifications may limit the epistemic diversity of the candidate pool.

When disaggregated by educational attainment, trust in the PYPR did not vary significantly between bachelor's and master's holders. However, doctoral degree holders ( $n = 11$ ), though few in number, were disproportionately skeptical: only 18.2% expressed high trust, and 54.5% reported unwillingness to apply. While the small sample size precludes firm statistical conclusions, this pattern echoes literature on the marginalization of academic expertise in politicized bureaucracies [17].

Moreover, education was not a statistically significant predictor in the logistic regression models. This suggests that while education may influence values and expectations, it does not independently drive behavioral outcomes—such as willingness to apply—once perceptions of fairness and trust are accounted for.



**Figure 2: Level of Education of Public Sector Employees**

*\*Note. Compiled by the authors based on a national survey of 687 Kazakhstani civil servants conducted in June 1–July 1 2025*

In sum, the educational composition of the PYPR-eligible cohort reflects institutional norms rather than meritocratic innovation, reinforcing the impression that the program operates within conventional bureaucratic logics rather than disrupting them.

3) GOVERNMENT LEVEL. A striking asymmetry emerges in the distribution of respondents by institutional affiliation: 80.8% serve in local executive bodies, while only 19.2% are affiliated with central government structures. This overrepresentation of local-level civil servants is not incidental. It mirrors the broader administrative landscape in Kazakhstan, where the majority of civil servants are stationed in oblast, district, and city-level administrations that interface directly with the population.

This structural positioning may critically shape perceptions of programs like the PYPR. Survey data reveal that local government respondents were significantly more skeptical about the program's fairness and impact. On the Perceived Fairness Index, the average score among local officials was 2.41, compared to 3.03 for central-level respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, trust scores and willingness to apply were both lower among local officials, despite their numerical dominance in the civil service.

The data suggest that the symbolic legitimacy of the PYPR may be unevenly distributed across administrative tiers. For local officials, the program may appear distant, overly centralized, or captured by national elites. This spatial and institutional distance may reinforce perceptions of exclusion from reformist opportunity structures, particularly if successful candidates are disproportionately drawn from central agencies.

Notably, government level was not a statistically significant predictor in multivariate models once perceptions of fairness and trust were controlled for. This implies that institutional affiliation shapes outcomes indirectly, through its influence on subjective legitimacy rather than as an independent effect.

In essence, while the PYPR aspires to national reach, its reception is conditioned by administrative stratification. Any serious reform of bureaucratic renewal must therefore reckon with these multi-level dynamics and the spatial politics of meritocratic inclusion.

4) POSITION TYPE. The sample is overwhelmingly composed of civil servants in non-managerial, executive roles, who constitute 86.3% of all respondents. Only 13.7% reported occupying formal leadership or managerial positions (see Figure 3). This distribution reflects the pyramidal nature of bureaucratic hierarchies, where the majority of staff operate at the implementation level and only a small proportion hold supervisory authority.

This occupational stratification carries significant implications for how state-driven meritocratic programs like

the PYPR are perceived and evaluated. Executive-level respondents demonstrated lower levels of trust in the fairness and accessibility of the program compared to their managerial counterparts. While the differences in trust were modest ( $M = 2.63$  vs.  $2.89$ ), willingness to apply was substantially lower among executive staff (36.9%) than among managers (51.1%).



**Figure 3: Positional status of survey respondents.**

*\*Note. Compiled by the authors based on a national survey of 687 Kazakhstani civil servants conducted in June 1–July 1 2025*

These disparities may stem from both institutional distance and perceived ceiling effects. Individuals in managerial roles are more likely to view PYPR as a viable next step in career advancement, while executive-level staff may perceive the program as out of reach, or subject to opaque political criteria.

Interestingly, despite this divergence, position type did not retain statistical significance in regression models once fairness and trust were included. This suggests that occupational status influences participation intention primarily through mediating attitudinal mechanisms, rather than direct structural privilege.

The results thus underscore a broader institutional paradox: although the PYPR is formally open to all eligible civil servants under 35, its functional accessibility appears skewed in favor of those already occupying elite-adjacent positions. As such, the program may risk reinforcing existing hierarchical trajectories rather than flattening them in the name of meritocratic renewal.

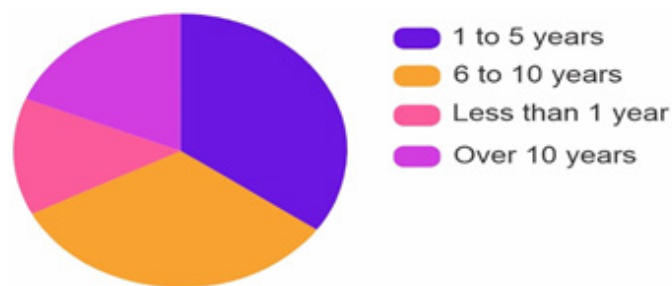
Years of Government Service. The experience profile of respondents illustrates a relatively balanced distribution across early- and mid-career stages. Roughly one-third of participants (34.8%) reported 1–5 years of service, followed closely by those with 6–10 years (32.6%). A smaller segment (13.8%) had less than one year of tenure, while 18.8% had served for over a decade (see Figure 4).

This composition is analytically significant. The predominance of respondents with mid-range experience (1–10 years) aligns with the target demographic of the PYPR, and indicates that the survey captures attitudes from individuals who are neither recent entrants nor embedded elites. Their perceptions, therefore, may reflect the lived tension between career aspiration and institutional constraint.

Trust in the PYPR exhibited a mild but consistent gradient across experience brackets. Respondents with less than one year of service were most optimistic: 44.2% expressed willingness to apply. This figure dropped slightly to 38.1% for the 1–5 year group, and to 34.3% for those with more than 10 years of experience. The inverse correlation between tenure and optimism—while not statistically strong—resonates with sociological theories of organizational socialization [18], which posit that prolonged immersion in bureaucratic systems often attenuates initial reformist enthusiasm.

These findings support the view that institutional skepticism is not innate but acquired. The longer individuals

remain within unreformed structures, the more likely they are to doubt the efficacy of new initiatives—even those nominally designed for their benefit.



**Figure 4: Length of service among survey respondents.**

Taken together, this distribution underscores a critical reform dilemma: the very professionals most in need of credible career pathways may also be the least likely to believe in them, due to accumulated experience with procedural inertia and political discretion.

5) ACADEMY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. Only 7.9% of respondents ( $n = 54$ ) identified as graduates of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Kazakhstan. This disproportion reflects the elite, selective nature of the Academy as a formal channel for accelerated bureaucratic advancement.

In principle, the Academy is positioned as a merit-based pipeline into higher civil service roles, and its graduates are expected to form the backbone of reform-oriented leadership. However, the small proportion of graduates within the eligible PYPR cohort raises questions about the reach and integrative capacity of Kazakhstan’s institutional training mechanisms. If the Academy’s impact is limited to a narrow segment, then broader systemic change may remain elusive.

Survey data indicate that Academy graduates reported higher trust in the PYPR selection process and were significantly more likely to express intention to apply (61.1%) compared to non-graduates (36.5%). This suggests that formal exposure to administrative theory and elite socialization may foster greater alignment with institutional narratives of reform and meritocracy.

At the same time, this attitudinal divergence raises the possibility of internal stratification within the youth cohort, whereby those inducted into elite bureaucratic networks perceive themselves as natural candidates for upward mobility—while others remain peripheral, both cognitively and procedurally.

Ultimately, the data suggest that while the Academy may reinforce reformist values among its graduates, its limited numerical presence and outsized optimism reveal a structural paradox: the most institutionally confident actors are also the least representative of the broader bureaucracy the PYPR is meant to serve.

6) BOLASHAK SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS. Only 1.6% of respondents ( $n = 11$ ) indicated that they were recipients of the prestigious «Bolashak» international scholarship. This marginal representation is consistent with the highly selective nature of the program and its relatively low annual intake compared to the broader public sector workforce.

While small in absolute terms, the attitudinal profile of Bolashak alumni within the sample is analytically revealing. Respondents with Bolashak experience reported the highest levels of skepticism toward the PYPR process among all educational subgroups. Only 27.3% expressed high trust in the program, and just 36.4% stated that they would consider applying.

These figures are somewhat counterintuitive. One might expect internationally trained professionals to embrace institutional reform efforts that promote meritocracy and competitiveness. However, the disconnect between technocratic ideals and bureaucratic realities may be particularly salient for this group. Familiar with global standards of transparency and performance-based evaluation, Bolashak alumni may view domestic initiatives like the PYPR through a more critical lens.

The data thus suggest a potential credibility gap: the very actors most aligned with global norms of governance and merit-based selection are also the most likely to doubt the effectiveness of domestic reforms framed in those terms.

This paradox raises critical questions for policy design. If internationally trained civil servants are not mobilized as allies in reform, but rather alienated by symbolic gestures and institutional inertia, the transformative potential of programs like the PYPR may remain largely unrealized.

7) FOREIGN EDUCATION (NON-BOLASHAK). Among the survey participants, only 5.2% (n = 36) reported having obtained a foreign education outside the framework of the state-sponsored Bolashak scholarship. The overwhelming majority (94.8%) received their education exclusively within Kazakhstan, indicating that international academic exposure remains a rare attribute among young civil servants—even within the most competitively eligible cohort for national reform initiatives like the PYPR.

Despite their limited numerical presence, respondents with foreign education exhibited distinct attitudinal patterns. While they did not significantly differ from the rest of the sample in terms of trust in the PYPR ( $p > 0.1$ ), their intention to apply was notably lower—just 33.3% compared to 38.7% among domestically educated peers. This suggests a degree of latent disillusionment with domestic meritocratic mechanisms among internationally trained professionals, mirroring trends observed among Bolashak alumni.

One plausible explanation is a misalignment between expectations formed in competitive, rule-based foreign academic environments and the perceived opacity of domestic selection processes. International exposure may sharpen sensitivity to informal practices, leading to a lower tolerance for symbolic reformism or procedural ambiguity.

These findings reinforce the broader thematic concern: that foreign-trained bureaucrats, both within and outside Bolashak, appear under-integrated and under-incentivized by flagship reform programs. The low rate of engagement from this subgroup may reflect structural barriers to reintegration, gaps in institutional trust, or skepticism toward the practical impact of participation.

From a policy perspective, this suggests that fostering elite international training is insufficient on its own. Unless mechanisms like the PYPR are perceived as substantively meritocratic and strategically inclusive, they may fail to harness the full reformist potential of globally competent bureaucrats.

8) AWARENESS OF PYPR. Survey data reveal a fragmented landscape of awareness regarding the PYPR. Only 18.9% of respondents reported being «very familiar» with the program, while 33.6% were familiar «in general terms». Notably, nearly half of all participants (47.5%) either «had heard of it without knowing details» or were «not familiar» with it at all.

Given that the sample comprises public servants under 35—the explicit target demographic of the PYPR—this finding raises substantive concerns about institutional communication, visibility, and outreach. If a reform initiative as high-profile as PYPR fails to penetrate its intended

constituency, its claim to inclusivity and transparency becomes tenuous.

This information gap may partially explain the ambivalence and skepticism observed in later sections of the survey. Respondents unfamiliar with program procedures or prior outcomes are unlikely to evaluate its legitimacy favorably or to express intent to apply. The gap between symbolic prominence and operational reach reflects broader challenges typical of hybrid governance contexts, where official reforms are often decoupled from bureaucratic practice [1, 2].

The lack of awareness also undermines the equity of access: individuals better informed about the program—due to central-level placement, elite networks, or academic exposure—are more likely to position themselves as viable candidates. In contrast, those at the periphery of institutional discourse remain structurally excluded, not by formal rules but by informational opacity.

Thus, low awareness is not merely a communication issue—it is an institutional filter, shaping who sees the reform as real, who sees it as relevant, and who participates at all.

9) KNOWLEDGE OF PYPR HISTORY. Only 11.1% of respondents correctly identified the full trajectory of the PYPR — that three rounds have been completed and the fourth is currently underway. An additional 13.8% selected partial answers (1, 2, or 3 rounds), while a striking 75.1% admitted they «don't know exactly».

This widespread historical unawareness among the eligible cohort of civil servants underscores a critical disjuncture between formal institutional memory and lived administrative experience. The PYPR, framed as a flagship presidential initiative for bureaucratic renewal, appears to be perceived more as a periodic headline than a sustained, trackable reform trajectory.

This finding has deep implications for legitimacy. If the vast majority of intended participants lack even basic familiarity with the initiative's history, it undermines the perceived continuity, credibility, and policy intentionality behind it. In other words, institutional memory has not translated into constituent memory.

Furthermore, lack of awareness correlates with decreased trust and lower intention to apply. Among those who correctly identified all previous rounds, 55.3% indicated they would consider applying. By contrast, among those unfamiliar with the program's stages, only 34.9% expressed the same intent—a statistically significant gap ( $p < 0.01$ ).

This suggests that informational access functions as a gatekeeper for meritocratic participation. Without a shared historical narrative, reform programs risk becoming temporally fragmented, and their procedural legitimacy diluted in the eyes of the very bureaucrats they aim to mobilize.

10) PERCEPTION OF COMPETITION IN PYPR. When asked to evaluate the competitiveness of the PYPR, nearly half of all respondents (49.2%) selected «I find it difficult to answer», indicating a significant level of uncertainty or disengagement with the selection process. Among those who provided substantive responses, 30.1% described the level of competition as «optimal», while 16.4% considered it «excessive—worthy candidates are excluded», and only 4.2% judged it «insufficient».

This distribution reveals a dual challenge: informational ambiguity and interpretive polarization. On the one hand, the high rate of non-response reflects limited procedural transparency or lack of personal exposure to the competitive dynamics of the program. On the other hand, among those familiar enough to offer an opinion, views are sharply divided, with a non-trivial portion perceiving

the system as hyper-selective to a fault.

This latter perception—of an overly stringent filter that excludes capable individuals—may erode trust in the fairness and meritocratic promise of the PYPR. In particular, such sentiment aligns with broader critiques of elite reproduction mechanisms, wherein formal openness masks de facto exclusivity [3, 19].

Crucially, belief in excessive competition correlated negatively with willingness to apply. Only 27.4% of those who viewed the competition as too high expressed application intent, compared to 44.8% among those who deemed it optimal ( $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that perceived procedural fairness—not merely the difficulty of competition—plays a pivotal role in shaping behavioral engagement.

Therefore, while competition is ostensibly a hallmark of meritocracy, if perceived as excessively narrow or opaque, it may backfire as a barrier to reform-oriented participation, particularly among those outside elite networks.

11) PYPR AS A MECHANISM OF SOCIAL MOBILITY. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the normative premise of the PYPR as a tool for upward mobility. Nearly 67.4% of participants rated the initiative positively (scores 4 or 5), with 49.9% giving it the highest mark. Only a small fraction (7.9%) viewed it extremely negatively, while neutral assessments (score 3) comprised 22.1% of the sample.

This distribution indicates a strong aspirational consensus around the concept of PYPR as a social elevator for young professionals in Kazakhstan's civil service. It reflects an underlying demand for institutionalized, transparent career pathways within a system historically shaped by informal patronage and vertical immobility.

However, enthusiasm for the idea must be distinguished from confidence in its implementation. The high level of normative approval may represent desire rather than experience. The 22.1% who selected the neutral midpoint may be read as a cohort of cautious optimists—supportive in principle but waiting for clearer evidence of impact. Conversely, the small but notable share of negative respondents may reflect direct disillusionment based on prior participation or observation.

This optimism is not equally distributed across demographics. Younger civil servants (under 30) were significantly more likely to rate the idea as «very positive», suggesting that proximity to entry-level structures may enhance perceived opportunity, while longer tenure correlates with increasing skepticism.

In short, the PYPR's conceptual legitimacy is high among its intended audience. But whether that legitimacy translates into trust, participation, or institutional renewal depends on the perceived integrity of its procedural execution—a subject explored in the following sections.

12) EVALUATION OF THE STRATEGIC PURPOSE OF PYPR. Respondents were asked to assess the foundational rationale for establishing the PYPR. The results suggest a dominant, yet not unequivocal, endorsement of the program's strategic intent. Over half of all participants (50.2%) characterized PYPR as a «useful initiative for renewing the state apparatus». Another 11.8% selected the more cautious view that the initiative is «necessary but requires refinement».

However, 33.3% of respondents reported difficulty in articulating any position at all, while 4.7% explicitly described the program as a «dubious initiative». This ambivalence in framing the program's purpose is analytically significant, particularly when considered alongside prior questions that measured familiarity and historical knowledge of PYPR.

The data suggest a disjunction between normative appeal and conceptual clarity. While the idea of institutional

rejuvenation resonates with a majority, a substantial portion of the eligible cohort either does not understand the program's core aims or remains unconvinced of their substantive merit. The «difficulty answering» response may reflect a broader pattern of bureaucratic disengagement, where reform initiatives are viewed as distant or symbolic rather than integrated into daily professional life.

Moreover, the relatively low share of outright rejection (4.7%) suggests that cynicism is not widespread, but rather latent and potentially growing in the absence of demonstrable outcomes. If left unaddressed, this middle band of indecision and passive ambiguity may become a silent barrier to institutional trust and reform participation.

These results underscore a policy imperative: legitimizing the PYPR requires more than rhetorical support or procedural visibility—it demands strategic coherence and clear articulation of purpose within the lived bureaucratic experience.

13) LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF PYPR. Assessments of the regional or institutional implementation of the PYPR reveal a notable ambivalence. While 30.9% of respondents characterized local implementation as «very effective», and 11.2% acknowledged «positive implementation with some problems», a nearly equal share (11.8%) viewed the process as «merely formal». Strikingly, the plurality—46.1%—chose «difficult to answer».

This distribution is revealing in at least two ways. First, the high rate of uncertainty suggests a limited visibility or transparency of PYPR procedures at the subnational level. Even among those within the eligible age cohort, implementation practices appear fragmented, variably communicated, or simply not observable. Second, the split between enthusiasm and formalism among those with opinions indicates heterogeneity in bureaucratic environments across regions and agencies.

Notably, respondents working in central agencies were significantly more likely to report positive assessments of implementation than their counterparts in local administrations ( $\chi^2 = 11.27, p < 0.01$ ). This spatial gap underscores the risk of center-periphery asymmetries in administrative reform: while centrally embedded actors may experience reform discourse as reality, their regional peers may encounter it only as policy abstraction.

The data raise questions about the scalability and equity of administrative modernization efforts. If implementation is uneven and visibility low, the PYPR may unintentionally reproduce perceptions of symbolic compliance—where reformist intent is praised, but institutional mechanisms remain elusive or performative in practice [1].

To preserve trust in meritocratic procedures, implementation must be not only technically sound, but equitably perceived—especially by those at the administrative margins whom the PYPR purports to elevate.

14) PERCEPTION OF THE PYPR SELECTION PROCEDURE. Respondents' evaluation of the multi-stage selection process of the PYPR—including testing, assessments, and interviews—reveals a sharp ambivalence regarding procedural legitimacy. While 32.6% viewed the procedure as «transparent and fair», nearly as many (31.8%) considered it either «partially transparent» (13.8%) or wholly distrusted it (8.2%). The largest share—45.4%—selected «difficult to judge», signaling either limited exposure or perceptual disengagement.

This pattern illustrates a critical gap between procedural formality and procedural credibility. Though the PYPR is formally structured to embody best practices of meritocratic recruitment, such as multi-level evaluation and standardized testing, its implementation has not uniformly translated into institutional trust.

The high level of uncertainty—particularly among civil servants from local agencies—suggests information asymmetry and inconsistent communication across administrative tiers. Many respondents may have no first-hand experience or verified accounts of the process, relying instead on informal signals, rumors, or second-hand knowledge. In such contexts, opacity breeds skepticism.

Notably, those who judged the procedure as «transparent and fair» were 1.9 times more likely to express willingness to apply for PYPR-2025, compared to those who said «partially transparent» or worse. This finding reinforces a core principle of institutional design: perceived fairness is not a byproduct of complexity, but of clarity, consistency, and communicative legitimacy [17].

The data thus reveal that a technocratic process alone is insufficient. Without institutional trust and perceptual legitimacy, even well-designed reforms risk being viewed as symbolic rituals rather than as authentic gateways to opportunity.

15) PERCEIVED INTELLECTUAL CONTRIBUTION OF PYPR MEMBERS. When asked whether PYPR participants bring fresh perspectives into public administration, only 31.6% of respondents answered affirmatively (yes, definitely). An additional 17.6% acknowledged a «partial» contribution. However, a significant 39.6% indicated that it is «difficult to judge», while 11.2% outright disagreed.

This fragmented perception points to a limited visibility of PYPR alumni within the administrative system, particularly among their peer cohort. If nearly 40% of eligible civil servants cannot identify clear intellectual or procedural innovation by the reserve's members, it suggests that either their roles remain peripheral, or their contributions are not institutionally communicated or recognized.

Such ambiguity undermines the PYPR's symbolic role as a generational reform mechanism. Reform narratives often rely on the portrayal of new entrants as agents of change [20], but in the absence of observable disruption or policy innovation, these actors risk being absorbed into the status quo—visibly present, but functionally neutralized.

Further disaggregation reveals that respondents with less than five years of experience were more likely to affirm the presence of «fresh perspectives» compared to longer-tenured peers ( $p < 0.05$ ). This suggests that receptivity to reform narratives may decline with bureaucratic socialization, as officials become accustomed to entrenched norms.

Overall, the perceived intellectual contribution of PYPR members appears sporadic and weakly institutionalized, reinforcing the concern that elite integration, absent systemic reform, may produce symbolic representation without transformative impact.

16) PERCEIVED PRIVILEGES OF PYPR MEMBERS. The perception of whether PYPR members receive preferential treatment is sharply divided, with nearly half of all respondents (48.9%) stating «I don't know», while 21.8% affirmed a «noticeable special treatment». An additional 16.9% identified privilege «at the level of perception», and only 12.4% rejected the idea, stating that PYPR members work under equal conditions.

This perceptual distribution speaks to a latent mistrust of informal advantage within the bureaucratic system. Although the majority of respondents do not assert direct claims of privilege, the combination of ambiguity («I don't know») and perceived informal signals suggests that the program suffers from legitimacy opacity. That is, even in the absence of formal inequity, the institutional environment fosters suspicions of unequal treatment.

Notably, respondents from local-level institutions were more likely to report «special treatment» than their cen-

tral-level counterparts, indicating a possible perception gap rooted in administrative distance. Such discrepancies may not only fuel resentment but also discourage wider participation if the initiative is seen as benefiting a pre-selected elite.

Furthermore, the high rate of non-response («I don't know») may indicate a lack of institutional transparency in the post-selection trajectories of PYPR members. Without clear metrics of evaluation or publicly visible accountability mechanisms, perceptions default to informal speculation.

Ultimately, even well-intentioned reforms risk backfiring when procedural fairness is perceived as selective or obscured. Addressing this requires more than formal rules—it demands visible equity, accountability, and open reporting of appointments and promotions derived from PYPR status.

17) ATTITUDES TOWARD TRANSPARENCY IN PYPR APPOINTMENTS. The survey reveals a notable appetite for enhanced transparency in the post-selection phase of the PYPR. A plurality of respondents (42.5%) supported public disclosure of appointment justifications, citing the potential to improve «trust and transparency». However, a considerable share (40.2%) remained undecided, while 17.3% opposed disclosure—either because they saw such appointments as internal matters (12.2%) or rejected public discussion altogether (5.1%).

This distribution signals a normative ambivalence between two competing principles in public sector governance: meritocratic transparency versus bureaucratic confidentiality. On one hand, advocates for disclosure may interpret PYPR appointments as semi-public goods—symbolic markers of reform whose legitimacy rests on public accountability. On the other hand, dissenters emphasize administrative discretion, suggesting that excessive transparency may politicize or constrain legitimate personnel policy.

The large number of undecided respondents suggests an unresolved cultural and institutional norm surrounding merit-based recruitment in Kazakhstan's bureaucracy. While the rhetorical demand for openness is strong, there may be uncertainty about where procedural transparency ends and managerial autonomy begins.

Importantly, support for disclosure was significantly higher among respondents who viewed PYPR as an effective social elevator and as procedurally fair ( $p < 0.01$ ). This reinforces the notion that trust in appointments is not only a function of outcome—but of visibility, justification, and narrative clarity.

In sum, the data indicate a latent demand for institutional storytelling: the idea that legitimacy is reinforced not only by rules, but by well-articulated reasons—especially when advancement is framed as a symbol of national reform.

18) PARTICIPATION INTENT FOR PYPR-2025. Only 25.3% of eligible respondents stated a clear intention to apply for the 2025 round of the PYPR, while 37.4% explicitly declined, and an almost identical proportion (37.3%) remained undecided. This ambivalent commitment to participation—despite widespread normative approval of the program—suggests a disconnect between belief in the institution and confidence in individual prospects.

This participation reluctance likely stems from two interrelated dynamics: first, limited perceived accessibility, as reflected in earlier findings on competition and transparency; second, existential uncertainty, where bureaucrats are unsure whether participation will yield concrete career outcomes.

Interestingly, this 1:1 ratio of rejection to indecision

points to an unstable opinion field—where attitudes remain fluid and susceptible to institutional signaling. For reform-oriented institutions, this liminality is strategic: it means that timely interventions (e.g., mentorship, peer narratives, success stories) could still shape behavioral intent before the application deadline.

Furthermore, analysis of cross-tabulations reveals that intention to apply is significantly higher among respondents who evaluated PYPR positively in terms of fairness, legitimacy, and visibility ( $p < 0.01$ ). This reinforces the central role of institutional trust as a behavioral trigger. Supportive attitudes alone are insufficient; they must be activated through credibility mechanisms.

In sum, the willingness to participate is less a matter of eligibility or ambition, and more a function of perceived return on trust. Strengthening participation thus requires not only procedural integrity but psychological assurance of merit-based advancement.

19) RECOMMENDATION TO PARTICIPATE IN PYPR. A clear majority of respondents (61.3%) expressed unrestrained support for recommending the PYPR to promising young professionals. An additional 16.0% endorsed the program conditionally («with reservations»), while 22.7% expressed opposition—either firm (12.5%) or tentative (10.2%).

These findings suggest that despite prevailing doubts about procedural integrity and uneven implementation, the PYPR retains strong reputational capital. The fact that nearly four out of five civil servants (77.3%) are willing to recommend the program in some form implies a latent belief in its symbolic and instrumental value, even among those who may not intend to apply themselves.

However, the 22.7% withholding recommendation—particularly the 12.5% who actively oppose it—indicate the presence of a minority narrative of disillusionment. These individuals may have direct or indirect exposure to perceived flaws in the selection process, issues of favoritism, or lack of career impact post-selection. Their dissent represents an important counterpoint to institutional optimism and should not be dismissed as marginal.

Notably, those who responded with «Yes, with reservations» tended to emphasize the importance of individual networks, prior exposure, or institutional affiliation as hidden prerequisites for success. This suggests that the perception of informal gatekeeping continues to temper enthusiasm.

The act of recommending a program is more than a gesture of endorsement—it reflects institutional trust transferred through social networks. When trust is partial or conditional, recommendations become strategic rather than wholehearted. The challenge, therefore, is to convert this cautious endorsement into confident advocacy, by aligning public narrative with lived administrative experience.

Discussion. The findings of this nationwide survey offer a multidimensional portrait of how Kazakhstan's PYPR is perceived by its primary target group—civil servants under the age of 35. Across the domains of legitimacy, procedural trust, visibility, and behavioral intention, the results reveal a distinct duality: strong normative endorsement of meritocratic renewal coexists with skepticism about its actual implementation and policy relevance.

One of the most prominent trends is institutional ambiguity. Across nearly all questions—ranging from perceptions of fairness to local implementation and post-selection privileges—a substantial proportion of respondents reported «difficulty answering». Such widespread uncertainty should not be misread as disengagement; rather, it points to the systemic opaqueness of reform execution. Bureaucrats may be familiar with the symbolic language

of reform but lack the empirical referents to form concrete assessments.

This informational asymmetry is consequential. The decision to apply for PYPR-2025 was found to correlate significantly with perceptions of fairness, credibility, and transparency—yet only 25.3% of respondents intended to apply. This pattern suggests that the program suffers from a legitimacy-performance gap, whereby rhetorical support is not translated into behavioral investment. As in many hybrid regimes, reform symbols are embraced discursively but remain institutionally fragile [1, 3].

Moreover, the perception that PYPR members enjoy unmerited advantages—combined with limited visibility of their substantive contributions—raises concerns about elite reproduction rather than renewal. In this light, the PYPR risks functioning as an instrument of symbolic compliance rather than a substantive mechanism of bureaucratic transformation [2].

There is, however, reason for cautious optimism. Over 60% of respondents indicated they would recommend the program to others, and nearly half supported public disclosure of appointment justifications—both of which reflect a residual trust in the ideal of merit-based advancement. However, such trust remains conditional, shaped by career stage, administrative level, and proximity to the reform center.

To preserve and extend this fragile trust capital, a number of institutional design implications emerge:

- 1) Institutionalize procedural transparency: Develop standardized reporting on PYPR selection outcomes and appointment criteria to reduce perception gaps.
- 2) Narrativize merit: Publicize clear, narrative-based justifications for the advancement of PYPR alumni, linking appointment to demonstrated competence.
- 3) Bridge the center-periphery gap: Improve the outreach, communication, and mentoring strategies in local and regional bureaucracies where skepticism is higher.
- 4) Combat symbolic drift: Ensure the PYPR's meritocratic ethos is not eroded by informal networks or elite entrenchment in practice.
- 5) Monitor and evaluate post-selection outcomes: Track the career trajectories of PYPR members to assess institutional integration and real performance impact.

As with all perception-based studies, this research has important caveats. First, although the survey was distributed nationally using the state-sanctioned e-Otinish platform and reached a diverse pool of public servants, the voluntary and anonymous nature of response collection (via Google Forms) precludes verification of actual application behavior or prior PYPR participation. Respondents' views reflect perceptions rather than observable institutional outcomes, and may be shaped by hearsay or second-hand knowledge rather than direct engagement.

Second, the restriction of the sample to public servants under 35—though necessary to align with PYPR's eligibility criteria—limits the generalizability of the findings to older bureaucrats or external observers. These groups may hold different, potentially more critical or experienced views on institutional renewal.

Third, the study is cross-sectional, capturing perceptions during a single time window (June 2025), which coincided with the start of the fourth PYPR selection round. This may have amplified attention and speculation about the program, temporarily skewing sentiments in either direction. A longitudinal design would be needed to assess how perceptions evolve post-appointment or across successive cohorts.

Finally, although key constructs were measured with categorical and Likert-style items, the study does not employ multivariate regression or causal inference tech-

niques. Future research could deepen this inquiry using experimental designs or panel data to trace how perceptions translate into application behavior, and how trust dynamics shift over time.

**CONCLUSION.** The PYPR represents one of the most ambitious administrative modernization initiatives in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet governance trajectory. Envisioned as a meritocratic pipeline for promoting young, capable civil servants into strategic leadership roles, the program has now entered its fourth cycle since its launch in 2019. Positioned within broader state narratives of reform, renewal, and responsiveness, the PYPR is often invoked as a symbol of bureaucratic transformation in a hybrid regime context.

This study provides one of the first empirical assessments of how the PYPR is perceived by its intended audience—civil servants under the age of 35. Drawing on original survey data collected nationwide in June 2025, the analysis reveals a nuanced and often contradictory set of perceptions. While the majority of respondents support the program in principle, fewer are willing to participate, and even fewer believe in the transparency or fairness of post-selection outcomes. This divergence between symbolic endorsement and behavioral hesitation signals a persistent legitimacy gap—a phenomenon widely discussed in the literature on symbolic compliance and institutional decoupling [1, 2].

The findings suggest that trust in the PYPR is both fragile and conditional. Respondents were often uncertain about the fairness of the selection process, the professional merit of appointees, or the real-world benefits afforded by participation. High levels of ambiguity—evident in large proportions of «Don't know» responses—point to deeper informational asymmetries and administrative opacity. These trends are consistent with prior research on

reformist initiatives in post-authoritarian and hybrid systems, where formal mechanisms of inclusion may coexist with informal gatekeeping and elite reproduction [3, 25].

Nonetheless, the PYPR retains significant symbolic and reputational value. A strong majority of respondents would recommend it to peers, and many support greater transparency through public justification of appointments. This latent trust—although cautious—is a valuable institutional asset. If leveraged properly, it could provide the foundation for restoring belief in upward mobility, meritocracy, and institutional fairness.

To translate symbolic promise into systemic renewal, policymakers must move beyond technocratic design toward institutional storytelling and procedural visibility. Reform must not only be implemented but also narrated, justified, and rendered intelligible to those it seeks to include. Otherwise, well-intentioned initiatives risk being perceived as elite reproduction in a reformist guise.

This study has several limitations. Its cross-sectional design captures perceptions during a single time period and may not reflect longer-term trust dynamics or the evolving reputation of the PYPR. Moreover, the data reflect self-reported attitudes, not verified behaviors or actual application records. Future research could build on this work by using panel surveys, administrative data, or mixed-method approaches to explore how perceived legitimacy translates into sustained engagement, performance outcomes, and long-term institutional transformation.

In closing, the PYPR is not just a policy mechanism but a test of reform credibility in Kazakhstan's evolving administrative state. Its future will depend not merely on who is selected—but on whether the public service perceives the process, the outcomes, and the intent as genuinely inclusive, fair, and transformational.

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## МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК ХОЛДИНГТЕР СТРАТЕГИЯЛЫҚ БАСҚАРУ ҚҰРАЛЫ РЕТІНДЕ: ХАЛЫҚАРАЛЫҚ САЛЫСТЫРМАЛЫ ТАЛДАУ

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**АНДАТПА.** Мақала активтерді стратегиялық басқару және ұлттық экономикалық басымдықтарды іске асыру құралы ретінде қарастырылатын мемлекеттік холдингтерді басқару модельдерін кешенді халықаралық салыстырмалы талдауға арналған. Зерттеудің өзектілігі жаһандық тұрақсыздық жағдайында мемлекеттің рөлін күшейтуге, квазимемлекеттік сектордың тиімділігін арттыру және орнықты дамудың ESG-бағдарланған қағидаттарына бейімделу қажеттілігіне байланысты. Зерттеудің мақсаты-ұзақ мерзімді перспективада мемлекеттік холдингтердің тұрақтылығын, инвестициялық тиімділігі мен бәсекеге қабілеттілігін қамтамасыз ететін Институционалдық тетіктер мен басқару стратегияларын анықтау. Әдістеме жаңа институционалдық экономика мен агенттік қатынастар теориясының теориялық тәсілдерін қолдана отырып, компаративті және институционалдық талдауға, кейс-стади мен факторлық талдауға негізделген. Эмпирикалық базаға нормативтік құжаттар, жылдық есептер, халықаралық ұйымдардың деректері (OECD, UNCTAD, World Bank), ESG-рейтингтер және сараптамалық сұхбаттар кіреді. Зерттеудің өзіндік ерекшелігі-мемлекеттік холдингтерді (Қытай, Сингапур, Франция, Италия, Испания, Малайзия) басқарудың халықаралық модельдерін жүйелеу және олардың трансформациясының сәттілігін анықтайтын факторларды анықтау. Мемлекеттік холдингтің дағдарысқа қарсы тұрақтандырылған стратегиялық инвесторға дейінгі посткеңестік эволюциясының бірегей үлгісі ретінде "Самұрық-Қазына" қазақстандық ұлттық әл-ауқат қорына ерекше назар аударылды. Зерттеу нәтижелері мемлекеттік холдингтердің тиімділігі активтердің ауқымымен емес, корпоративтік басқару сапасымен, автономия деңгейімен, ашықтықпен, ESG принциптерінің интеграциясымен және сыртқы сын-қатерлерге бейімделу қабілетімен анықталатынын көрсетеді. Temasek және Khazana тәжірибелері автономды және гибриді модельдердің артықшылықтарын көрсетеді, меншік иесі мен менеджер функцияларын нақты бөледі, ал қытайлық орталықтандырылған модель шектеулі ашықтықта жоғары жұмылдыру қабілетін қамтамасыз етеді. Қазақстан үшін дамудың негізгі бағыты институционалдық тұрақтылықты нығайту, жария есептілікті кеңейту және инвестициялық икемділікті арттыру болып табылады. Алынған тұжырымдар активтерді басқару және квазимемлекеттік секторды жаңғырту саласындағы мемлекеттік саясатты қалыптастыру кезінде пайдаланылуы мүмкін.

**ТҮЙІН СӨЗДЕР:** мемлекеттік холдингтер; корпоративтік басқару; трансформация; Temasek; Samruk-Kazyna; мемлекеттік активтер; ESG-қағидаттар.

## Государственные холдинги как инструмент стратегического управления: международный сравнительный анализ

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**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Статья посвящена комплексному международному сравнительному анализу моделей управления государственными холдингами, рассматриваемых как инструмент стратегического управления активами и реализации национальных экономических приоритетов. Актуальность исследования обусловлена усилением роли государства в условиях глобальной нестабильности, необходимости повышения эффективности квазигосударственного сектора и адаптации к ESG-ориентированным принципам устойчивого развития. Цель исследования - выявить институциональные механизмы и управленческие стратегии, обеспечивающие устойчивость, инвестиционную эффективность и конкурентоспособность государственных холдингов в долгосрочной перспективе. Методология основана на компаративном и институциональном анализе, кейс-стади и факторном анализе, с применением теоретических подходов новой институциональной экономики и теории агентских отношений. Эмпирическая база включает нормативные документы, годовые отчеты, данные международных организаций (OECD, UNCTAD, World Bank), ESG-рейтинги и экспертные интервью. Оригинальность исследования заключается в систематизации международных моделей управления государственными холдингами (Китай, Сингапур, Франция, Италия, Испания, Малайзия) и выявление факторов, определяющих успешность их трансформации. Особое внимание уделено казахстанскому Фонду национального благосостояния «Самрук-Казына» как уникальному примеру постсоветской эволюции государственного холдинга от антикризисного стабилизатора к стратегическому инвестору. Результаты исследования показывают, что эффективность государственных холдингов определяется не масштабом активов, а качеством корпоративного управления, уровнем автономии, прозрачностью, интеграцией ESG-принципов и способностью адаптироваться к внешним вызовам. Опыт Temasek и Khazana демонстрирует преимущества автономных и гибридных моделей с четким разделением функций собственника и менеджера, тогда как китайская централизованная модель обеспечивает высокую мобилизационную способность при ограниченной прозрачности. Для Казахстана ключевым направлением развития является укрепление институциональной устойчивости, расширение публичной отчетности и повышение инвестиционной гибкости. Полученные выводы могут быть использованы при формировании государственной политики в сфере управления активами и модернизации квазигосударственного сектора.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** государственные холдинги; корпоративное управление; трансформация; Temasek; Samruk-Kazyna; государственные активы; ESG-принципы.