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Research Article

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENTS IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES: ACCOUNTABILITY AND TRUST IN PARLIAMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT

Background: *In democratic societies governed by the rule of law, parliament plays a crucial role by passing laws, holding the government accountable, expressing the will of the people, and cooperating with local communities. However, the role of the legislative branch may vary significantly depending on the political system of individual countries. Kazakhstan serves as a case study of how the presidency and executive branch control the country's political life, and the role of parliament is not yet fully defined, undergoing a process of transformation. Therefore, it is crucial to understand people's perceptions of the role of parliament in the context of reforms aimed at deepening the democratisation of society.*

Methods: *This study employs a quantitative research approach to examine public attitudes towards Parliament, focusing on accountability and public trust. A survey conducted among 598 respondents resulted in an accurate representation of public opinion. The study aims to assess trust in governmental entities, including Parliament; the perception of the authorities' responsibility for Kazakhstan's socio-economic situation; and satisfaction with the current Parliament's performance and the laws it has passed. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics.*

Results and conclusion: *The findings indicate that public trust in the legislative body in Kazakhstan is significantly lower than in the executive branch. According to the findings, Parliament is perceived as having limited autonomy and influence in socio-economic governance. Most respondents believe that the President and the government shape important national decisions. The study further revealed that most respondents believe that parliamentarians tend to represent the interests of the government or their political parties rather than those of the voters. The findings also highlighted a substantial gap between*

lawmakers and the public, with many respondents not even knowing who their parliamentary representatives are. These findings underscore the urgent need for reforms that improve parliamentary oversight, legislative independence, and public communication. The study is especially important in light of the government's broader commitment to the "Listening State" initiative, which aims to increase public involvement in governance and decision-making.

1 INTRODUCTION

Parliaments are essential in modern democratic societies, serving as the foundation for representation, legislation, and executive oversight.[1] They represent the people's will and ensure that varied interests are considered in the governance process. The Parliament of Kazakhstan, shaped by a history of constitutional reforms, presents a unique case in the study of legislative institutions within transitioning democracies. Over time, it has undergone substantial constitutional transformations intended to balance executive and legislative powers. However, its precise role within the state power structure remains an evolving issue.

One of the most pressing concerns in Kazakhstan's parliamentary development is the practical application of the separation of powers. Throughout its history, the country's parliament has undergone six constitutional reforms, each altering its authority and legislative role.[2] The first Constitution, adopted in 1993, established the Supreme Soviet as the highest representative and legislative body, reflecting a parliamentary model of governance. The 1995 Constitution replaced it with a strong presidential system, positioning Parliament as a secondary governing body. Subsequent constitutional reforms—particularly in 2007 and 2017—sought to strengthen Parliament's authority; however, the president and executive branch have continued to dominate the political system. The 2022 constitutional amendments also aimed to enhance parliamentary independence and foster citizen engagement in governance.

Despite these reforms, the distribution of state power remains asymmetrical, with presidential and executive dominance continuing to heavily influence legislative processes. The system of checks and balances in Kazakhstan is weak due to the President's dominance, even though the principle of separation of powers is formally recognised. Parliament, despite being constitutionally defined as the highest legislative body,

1 Tonye Clinton Jaja and Zaka Firma Aditya, 'Promoting the Good Governance by Advancing the Role of Parliamentarians and the Term Offices Limitation (Comparing Nigeria and Indonesia)' (2022) 7(1) Journal of Indonesian Legal Studies 265, doi:10.15294/jils.v7i1.54776; Awal Hossain, 'Role of Parliament and Governance in Bangladesh: Problems and Prospects' (2023) 8(1) Journal of Public Policy and Administration 31, doi:10.47604/jppa.1791.

2 Zhenis Kembayev, 'Recent Constitutional Reforms in Kazakhstan: A Move towards Democratic Transition?' (2017) 42(4) Review of Central and East European Law 294, doi:10.1163/15730352-04204002.

delegates too much power to the executive, preventing it from functioning independently.[3] This imbalance raises critical questions about Parliament's role in oversight and the representation of public interests.

The urgency of reassessing the role of parliament in Kazakhstan intensified following the "Tragic January" events of 2022. The nationwide protests and the subsequent government response exposed systemic governance inefficiencies, including the weakness of state institutions and a growing disconnect between the executive branch and citizens.[4] As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated in his 11 January 2022 address to the Mazhilis: "The detachment of certain executive bodies from the harsh realities and needs of citizens… a distorted perception of people's lives, their aspirations, and demands."[5] This crisis accelerated discussions on constitutional and political reforms, emphasising the need for stronger parliamentary authority, enhanced oversight mechanisms, and increased governmental accountability.

This study is particularly relevant in the context of Kazakhstan's Concept of Legal Policy until 2030, which outlines long-term strategies for improving governance efficiency and strengthening legal institutions, as well as the country's "Listening State" initiative. Kazakhstan launched its Open Government initiative in 2015 as part of broader efforts to encourage transparency, digital governance, and citizen involvement. Initially introduced under President Nursultan Nazarbayev as part of the "100 Concrete Steps" reform programme, the initiative was renamed the "Listening State" under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev's administration in 2019 to emphasise government responsiveness. Despite these efforts, the reform has largely remained a tool for regime legitimacy rather than meaningful citizen engagement.[6] Given the rapid pace of political and constitutional changes, it is crucial to evaluate whether recent reforms have genuinely enhanced parliament's role or if additional institutional adjustments are required.

The primary aim of this study is to analyse public perceptions of the Parliament of Kazakhstan, focusing on levels of public trust and accountability. It seeks to assess how citizens view the Parliament's role in governance, its autonomy in decision-making, and its accessibility to the population. By addressing these critical issues, the study contributes

3 Timur Kanapyanov, 'Role and Place of the Parliament of Kazakhstan in the System of Checks and Balances' (2018) 51(1) Communist and Post-Communist Studies 81, doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.01.007.

4 Gaziz Abishev, Bakhytzhan Kurmanov and Zhaxylyk Sabitov, 'Authoritarian Succession, Rules, and Conflicts: Tokayev's Gambit and Kazakhstan's Bloody January of 2022 (*Qandy Qantar*)' (2024) 40(6) Post-Soviet Affairs 429, doi:10.1080/1060586X.2024.2377929.

5 Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, 'Lessons of "Tragic January": National Unity as a Guarantee of Independence : Speech at the Mazhilis of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 11 January 2022' (*Әділет*, 2022) <https://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/K2200002022> accessed 5 February 2025.

6 Bakhytzhan Kurmanov, Urazgali Selteyev and Anuar Almaganbetov, '"Listening State?": Exploring Citizens' Perceptions of Open Government in Tokayev's Kazakhstan' (2024) 43(2) Central Asian Survey 235, doi:10.1080/02634937.2023.2268652.

to Kazakhstan's broader discourse on constitutional reform and governance modernisation, offering insights into how legislative institutions can evolve to foster a more transparent, balanced, and democratic governance system.

2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF PARLIAMENTARISM IN KAZAKHSTAN

The evolution of parliamentary governance in Kazakhstan has proceeded through clearly defined historical stages, each characterised by significant constitutional and institutional changes. The foundation was laid by the Declaration of State Sovereignty, which introduced the principle of separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers.[7] This was subsequently reinforced by the Law on State Independence, officially marking Kazakhstan's sovereignty and institutional autonomy.[8] Initially, Kazakhstan utilised a unicameral Supreme Soviet that held substantial legislative authority but lacked clear checks and balances, creating tensions within the emerging governance structure.

The first Constitution of independent Kazakhstan, adopted on 28 January 1993, defined the Supreme Soviet as the country's highest representative and legislative organ.[9] Under this Constitution, Kazakhstan was structured as a parliamentary republic headed by three bodies of power: the Supreme Soviet, the Constitutional Court and the executive power, represented by the president.[10] However, the broad and often ambiguous distribution of powers under this Constitution generated significant governance challenges, highlighting an urgent need for clearer institutional boundaries.[11] This period was also marked by power struggles between legislative and executive authorities, prompting further constitutional adjustments aimed at stabilising governance and clarifying institutional responsibilities.[12]

As a result, the first 1993 Constitution remained in force for only two years. In March 1995, Kazakhstan's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, dissolved the Supreme Soviet and initiated a national referendum. A new Constitution was adopted on 30 August 1995, marking a significant shift from a parliamentary republic to a presidential, and eventually a super-presidential republic system. This new framework concentrated extensive powers in

7 Resolution of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR no 307-XII of 25 October 1990 'On the Declaration of State Sovereignty of the Kazakh SSR' [1990] Bulletin of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR 44/408.

8 Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 16 December 1991 'On the State Independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan' [1991] Bulletin of the Supreme Council of the Kazakh SSR 51/622.

9 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 28 January 1993 (repealing 1995) <https://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/K930001000_> accessed 5 February 2025.

10 Kembayev (n 2).

11 Ayan Toleubekov, 'Constitutional and Legal Status of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan' (PhD (Law) thesis, National Research University Higher School of Economics 2015).

12 Helene Thibault and Sabina Insebayeva, 'The Political System of Kazakhstan' in Jakob Lempp and Sebastian Mayer (eds), *Central Asia in a Multipolar World: Internal Change, External Actors, Regional Cooperation* (Springer Nature 2024) 39, doi:10.1007/978-3-031-63727-8_3.

the hands of the president and marked the beginning of Nazarbayev's consolidation of power and 30-year authoritarian rule.[13]

A major transformation of Parliament occurred with the adoption of the 1995 Constitution, which established Kazakhstan's current bicameral legislature, composed of the Senate and the Mazhilis.[14] This restructuring aimed to improve legislative efficiency, reinforce executive-legislative relationships, and address institutional weaknesses inherited from earlier constitutional frameworks. Essential legislative documents—most notably the Constitutional Laws on Parliament and the Status of Deputies and the Law on the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan—provided the institutional groundwork by clearly defining the competencies, responsibilities, and procedures for each parliamentary chamber.[15]

The constitutional reforms of 2007 marked a significant shift towards a presidential-parliamentary system, expanding Parliament's oversight functions while maintaining a strong executive authority. Further constitutional amendments in 2017 introduced mechanisms intended to increase parliamentary influence and accountability over governmental policies, although they did not substantially diminish the strong presidential leadership within Kazakhstan's governance model.[16]

Kazakhstan's parliamentary experience also reflects broader regional challenges inherent to post-Soviet governance systems. Countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan face common structural and political obstacles, including weak political opposition, dominant elite-driven politics, and limited party competition. While Kyrgyzstan has experimented with a parliamentary republic model, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have maintained strong presidential systems. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan's recent constitutional reforms demonstrate incremental movements towards a more balanced relationship between the executive and legislative branches, emphasising a growing role for parliamentary oversight and democratic accountability.[17]

13 Gerrit Krol, 'The Legislative Role of the Russian Duma and the Kazakh Mazhilis: Authoritarianism and Power Sharing in Post-Soviet Eurasia' (2021) 37(6) Post-Soviet Affairs 559, doi:10.1080/1060586X.2021.1970956; Kanapyanov (n 3); Kembayev (n 2).

14 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan of 30 August 1995 (amended 1 January 2023) <https://adilet.zan.kz/eng/docs/K950001000_> accessed 5 February 2025.

15 Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan no 2529 of 16 October 1995 'On the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Status of its Deputies' [1995] Gazette of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan 21/124; Constitutional Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan no 2688 of 18 December 1995 'On the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan' [1995] Gazette of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Kazakhstan 23/145.

16 Kembayev (n 2).

17 Scott Newton, 'The Constitutional Systems of the Independent Central Asian States: A Contextual Analysis' (2018) 16(2) International Journal of Constitutional Law 686, doi:10.1093/icon/moy023.

The historical analysis of Kazakhstan's parliamentary evolution highlights several critical insights. The development of Kazakhstan's parliamentary system can be delineated into six distinct stages:

- 1990-1993: Transition from the Soviet system to an independent parliamentary structure
- 1993-1995: Establishment and strengthening of a professional parliamentary body
- 1995-1998: Consolidation of Parliament's governance role
- 1998-2007: Transition from a purely presidential towards a presidential-parliamentary republic
- 2007-2017: Further modernisation of the presidential system, enhancing parliamentary authority and oversight
- 2017-2022: Redistribution of authority among government branches, emphasising parliamentary accountability and oversight.[18]

Despite persistent political challenges, including weak political parties and limited opposition representation, Kazakhstan's parliamentary institutions have gradually strengthened.

The effectiveness of governance in Kazakhstan significantly depends on the interaction between parliament and other state institutions. This became especially evident during the events of January 2022, when mass protests escalated into violent confrontations, revealing substantial governance weaknesses at multiple institutional levels.[19] Public dissatisfaction was notably fueled by Parliament's perceived inability to effectively address critical socio-economic issues and its endorsement of controversial legislation. In response, significant constitutional reforms were implemented in 2022, resulting in 56 amendments across 33 constitutional articles.[20] While some experts argue these reforms were largely focused on institutional wording without fundamentally altering governance dynamics, others believe they represent crucial steps towards rebalancing power distribution among state institutions.[21]

Formally, Kazakhstan operates under a system of checks and balances among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. However, in practice, the President remains the dominant constitutional figure, possessing extensive powers over both legislative and executive institutions.[22] Although Parliament formally holds legislative authority, its influence is frequently overshadowed by expansive presidential prerogatives. Unlike classical

18 Kembayev (n 2); Thibault and Insebayeva (n 12).

19 Abishev, Kurmanov and Sabitov (n 4).

20 Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan no 142-VII 3PK of 17 September 2022 'On Amendments and Supplements to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan' [2022] Gazette of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan 15-18/65.

21 Thibault and Insebayeva (n 12).

22 Kanapyanov (n 3).

presidential models, which maintain a clearer separation between legislative and executive powers, Kazakhstan's constitutional framework grants the President significant legislative influence, including the authority to propose, veto, and shape legislation. Article 40(3) of the Constitution explicitly establishes the President's role in ensuring coordination among branches, reinforcing the centrality of the executive in national governance.[23]

A critical challenge facing Kazakhstan's parliamentary system is the delegation of legislative authority to the executive branch. The constitutional amendments introduced in 2022 expanded governmental powers by permitting the government to issue legally binding acts without prior parliamentary approval.[24] Such practices conflict with Article 3(4) of the Constitution, which mandates a clear separation of powers, undermining parliamentary oversight and reinforcing executive predominance.[25]

Moreover, parliamentary oversight mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Although deputies formally possess the right to question governmental actions, Parliament lacks robust investigative authority, significantly restricting its capacity to hold the executive accountable. In practice, the President continues to exercise substantial influence over Parliament through multiple methods: the dominance of pro-presidential parties, limited political pluralism, and the President's constitutional authority to appoint key officials, including members of the Senate. Furthermore, despite the constitutional principle of checks and balances, the President still has significant power over the legislative agenda and can dissolve the Mazhilis (lower house), further constraining parliamentary independence.[26] Thus, Parliament's ability to become a fully independent and authoritative body is inhibited by the concentration of power in the executive branch and limited political competition.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Parliaments are a fundamental component of democratic systems, playing a crucial role in maintaining a system of checks and balances, representing citizens' interests, passing laws, and overseeing the executive branch.[27] An effective parliament advocates transparency in government accountability and protects citizens' rights. However, in post-Soviet countries, parliaments often struggle to build independence and legitimacy.[28]

23 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n 14).
24 Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan no 142-VII ЗРК (n 20).
25 Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n 14).
26 Kanapyanov (n 3).
27 Jaja and Aditya (n 1).
28 Newton (n 17); Sarah Whitmore, 'Performing Protest and Representation? Exploring Citizens' Perceptions of Parliament in Ukraine' (2020) 36(1) East European Politics 86, doi:10.1080/21599165.2019.1683543.

In Kazakhstan, existing studies indicate that Parliament is subject to the executive branch, raising doubts about democratic accountability and its efficiency in preserving public trust.[29] Comparative research on post-Soviet countries reveals varying levels of parliamentary empowerment. For instance, constitutional reforms, political competition, and parliamentary protests have increased parliamentary activism in Georgia and Ukraine.[30] By contrast, even in long-established European democracies, parliaments often struggle to foster strong engagement with citizens. The European Parliament, for instance, assumes varying roles depending on the governance system within the European Union.[31] In Finland, despite efforts to increase transparency, parliamentary processes—particularly committee work—remain largely closed, limiting public participation. The Finnish legislature's preference for government oversight over citizen engagement reflects its opposition to democratic innovations.[32]

Public trust in parliaments is widely regarded as a key indicator of democratic legitimacy. Yet, legislative studies have historically neglected the relationship between parliaments and citizens. Research on this topic remains fragmented due to the diversity of parliamentary systems, difficulties in accessing data, and the diverse set of indicators involved.[33] Studies have shown that trust in parliaments worldwide is determined by their perceived effectiveness, responsiveness, macroeconomic performance, regime type, electoral system, and ability to represent diverse interests.[34]

In Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states, public perceptions of legislative ineffectiveness are rooted in a historical legacy of centralised governance and weak parliamentary autonomy.[35] After gaining independence, many of these countries, including Kazakhstan, retained strong presidential systems with parliaments that held limited authority over key

29 Kanapyanov (n 3); Kembayev (n 2); Newton (n 17).

30 Whitmore (n 28).

31 Sergio Fabbrini, 'Between Power and Influence: The European Parliament in a Dual Constitutional Regime' (2019) 41(3) Journal of European Integration 417, doi:10.1080/07036337.2019.1599370.

32 Hyeon Su Seo and Tapio Raunio, 'Reaching out to the People? Assessing the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens in Finland' (2017) 23(4) Journal of Legislative Studies 614, doi:10.1080/13572334.2017.1396694.

33 Cristina Leston-Bandeira, 'Studying the Relationship between Parliament and Citizens' (2012) 18(3-4) Journal of Legislative Studies 265, doi:10.1080/13572334.2012.706044.

34 Tom van der Meer, 'In What We Trust? A Multi-Level Study into Trust in Parliament as an Evaluation of State Characteristics' (2010) 76(3) International Review of Administrative Sciences 517, doi:10.1177/0020852310372450; Anna Ruelens, Bart Meuleman and Ides Nicaise, 'Examining Macroeconomic Determinants of Trust in Parliament: A Dynamic Multilevel Framework' (2018) 75 Social Science Research 142, doi:10.1016/j.ssresearch.2018.05.004.

35 Gerrit Krol, 'Legislative Performance of the Russian State Duma: The Role of Parliament in an Authoritarian Regime' (2017) 33(4) East European Politics 450, doi:10.1080/21599165.2017.1346504; Krol (n 13); Anton Shirikov, 'Who Gets Ahead in Authoritarian Parliaments? The Case of the Russian State Duma' (2022) 28(4) Journal of Legislative Studies 554, doi:10.1080/13572334.2021.1940435.

political and economic decisions.[36] This situation, coupled with weak political party competition and constrained civil society engagement, has contributed to the perception that parliaments are largely ineffective.

Kazakhstan is frequently cited as a "superpresidential" system, in which parliamentary institutions exist but operate within executive constraints.[37] Furthermore, the effectiveness of the Parliament is further limited by restrictions on media freedom and civil society, which limit open public discourse and suppress opposition voices.[38] Nonetheless, strengthening Kazakhstan's parliamentary institutions is crucial for its long-term sustainable development and political stability. An empowered and credible legislature can help manage political transitions, increase civic engagement, and ensure long-term stability in the country.[39]

Accordingly, this study builds upon existing literature by providing empirical insights into the public perceptions of Kazakhstan's Parliament and contributing to a broader understanding of the structural challenges it faces in achieving democratic legitimacy.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study aims to examine public perceptions of the Parliament of Kazakhstan through a quantitative research approach. Employing survey methodology allowed for the systematic collection and analysis of primary data concerning accountability and public trust in Parliament. Surveys are a well-established tool for collecting and analysing public opinion in a systematic manner, resulting in quantifiable insights.[40]

The survey questionnaire included items on parliamentary trust and public engagement with parliamentary activities. Respondents were asked multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions focusing on trust in governmental institutions, including the Parliament, perceptions of authorities' responsibility for Kazakhstan's socio-economic situation, satisfaction with the current Parliament's performance and the laws it has passed, and perceptions of whose interests members of Parliament represent.

A total of 598 respondents participated in the study, representing a diverse demographic group in terms of age, gender, and professional background. Respondents ranged in age

36 Kanapyanov (n 3); Kembayev (n 2); Krol (n 13).
37 Kembayev (n 2).
38 Human Rights Watch, 'Kazakhstan: Events of 2023' in *World Report 2024* (Human Rights Watch 2024) 354.
39 Aliya Kassymbek and others, 'The Role of Parliament in the Sustainable Development of the Country: Agenda for Kazakhstan' (2019) 2 Rivista di Studi sulla Sostenibilita 28, doi:10.3280/RISS2019-002005.
40 Floyd J Fowler, *Survey Research Methods* (5th edn, SAGE Publications Inc 2014).

from 18 to 65 years old, ensuring perspectives from both younger and older citizens. Gender distribution was 54.7% female and 45.3% male, ensuring balanced representation.

The study utilised an online survey distributed through Google Forms and distributed to a range of platforms, including social media networks (e.g., Facebook, Telegram), professional forums, and university mailing lists. The study employed a mixed sampling strategy combining purposive and snowball sampling techniques to capture perspectives from various social groups nationwide. Importantly, the sample was not limited to a specific region, allowing for a broader understanding of nationwide perceptions. The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics to evaluate public attitudes toward the Parliament and identify key trends and patterns in public opinion.

While the online survey method allowed for broad accessibility, it lacks depth in exploring underlying reasons for public perceptions, which could be addressed through follow-up qualitative research. Despite these limitations, the study offers a valuable glimpse into public trust and perceptions towards the Parliament of Kazakhstan. The findings provide crucial insights for policymakers and scholars examining governance and institutional trust in post-Soviet states.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Understanding the role of Kazakhstan's Parliament within the system of state power involves examining public trust in political institutions. Political trust is fundamental to democratic legitimacy, significantly influencing citizen engagement and perceptions of governmental effectiveness.[41] To explore this issue, a survey was conducted to measure the perceived role and importance of Parliament among Kazakhstan's population. Conducted via Google Forms using an interactive questionnaire, the data was analysed through systematisation, comparative analysis, and ranking methods. A total of 598 respondents aged between 18 and 65 participated, with 54.7% female and 45.3% male, ensuring broad demographic representation. Contemporary studies note that public perceptions of legislative bodies typically depend on transparency, effectiveness, and historical political structures.[42] Therefore, these results offer critical insights into how the Kazakhstani Parliament is perceived in relation to other branches of state power and provide broader context on issues of political accountability and governance.

41 Leston-Bandeira (n 33); van der Meer (n 34).

42 van der Meer (n 34).

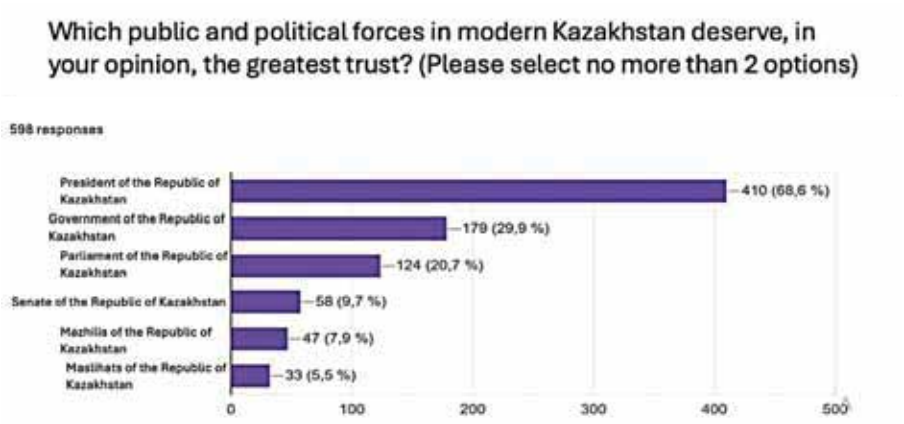

Figure 1. Which public and political forces in modern Kazakhstan deserve, in your opinion, the greatest trust?

To gauge trust levels toward governmental institutions, respondents were asked: "Which public and political institutions in modern Kazakhstan deserve the greatest trust?" (Figure 1). Results indicated a substantial trust concentration within the executive branch, with 68.6% expressing trust in the President, 29.9% in the Government, and only 20.7% in Parliament. A minimal 5.5% expressed trust in local representative bodies. This distribution highlights a political culture heavily oriented towards executive dominance, with representative institutions perceived as secondary. High trust in the President aligns with patterns observed in post-Soviet states, where executive authority traditionally plays a pivotal role in governance.[43] Conversely, lower trust in Parliament suggests perceptions of limited legislative autonomy and effectiveness. Thus, Kazakhstan's Parliament appears to be viewed more as a formal entity than a truly influential institution, reflecting historical institutional legacies and structural constraints on legislative power.

Another important question sought to identify the institutions perceived as primarily responsible for Kazakhstan's socio-economic situation (Figure 2). The majority (63.4%) attributed this responsibility to the President, with 26.9% naming the Government, and only 23.7% identifying Parliament. The strong attribution of socio-economic accountability to the President reinforces the executive-centric governance model. In democratic states, parliaments often hold significant roles through legislative oversight.[44] However, in Kazakhstan, the Parliament is not widely perceived as a leading actor in socio-economic governance, potentially due to constitutional limits on its powers or a public tendency to associate national outcomes predominantly with the President.[45] This limited parliamentary

43 Kembayev (n 2); Newton (n 17).

44 Alan Convery and others, 'Questioning Scrutiny: The Effect of Prime Minister's Questions on Citizen Efficacy and Trust in Parliament' (2021) 27(2) Journal of Legislative Studies 207, doi:10.1080/13572334.2020.1850010.

45 Kanapyanov (n 3); Kembayev (n 2).

influence also raises concerns about its effectiveness in addressing critical societal issues, such as human rights violations and gender-based violence.[46] These responses also highlight a possible public misunderstanding of formal governmental roles, suggesting Parliament's position is viewed as more symbolic than substantive in policy formulation.

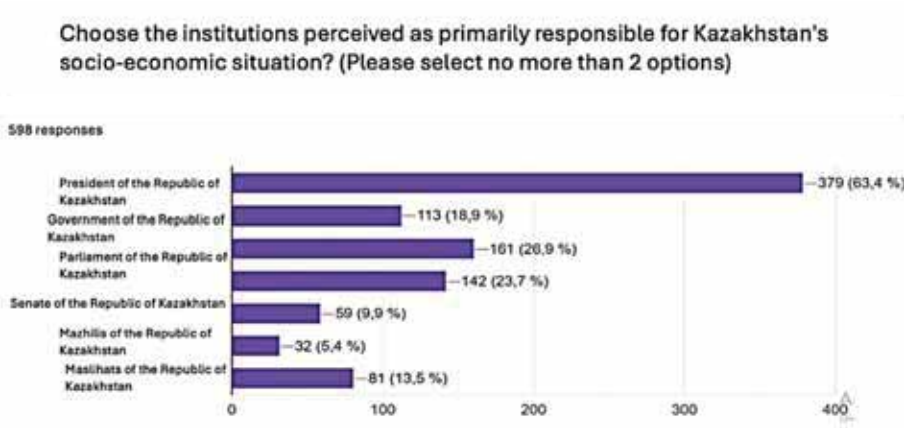

Figure 2. Choose the institutions perceived as primarily responsible for Kazakhstan's socio-economic situation.

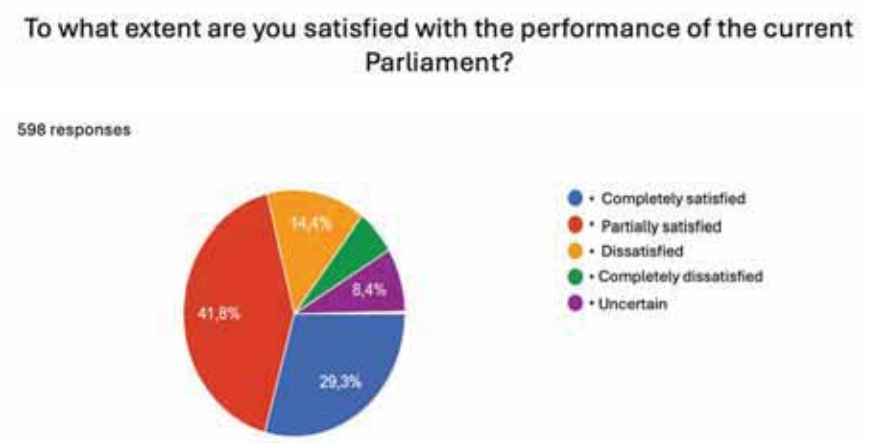

Figure 3. Performance of the current Parliament

46 Kanatay Dalmatov and others, 'Addressing Human Rights Violations in the Criminal Justice System of Kazakhstan: The Role of the Prosecutor's Office and a Call for Legislative Reforms' (2024) 7(3) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 63, doi:10.33327/AJEE-18-7.3-a000323; Akmaral Turarbekova and others, 'Legal Frameworks for Combating Violence Against Women in Kazakhstan: Analyzing Effectiveness and Implementation Gaps' (2025) 8(1) Access to Justice in Eastern Europe 264, doi:10.33327/AJEE-18-8.1-a000119.

Respondents also evaluated the performance of the current Parliament (Figure 3). Results indicated that 41.8% were partially satisfied, 29.3% were completely satisfied, 14.4% were dissatisfied, and 8.4% were uncertain. These responses indicate a generally moderate, indifferent public attitude toward Parliament, lacking strong approval or disapproval. Such patterns mirror broader trends observed in emerging democracies, where legislative bodies frequently struggle to attain broad public approval due to perceived inefficiencies, limited independence, or weak enforcement capacities.[47] Additionally, uncertainty among 8.4% of respondents suggests potential transparency and communication issues. When parliamentary activities lack public visibility, they are commonly perceived as ineffective, regardless of their actual contributions to governance.

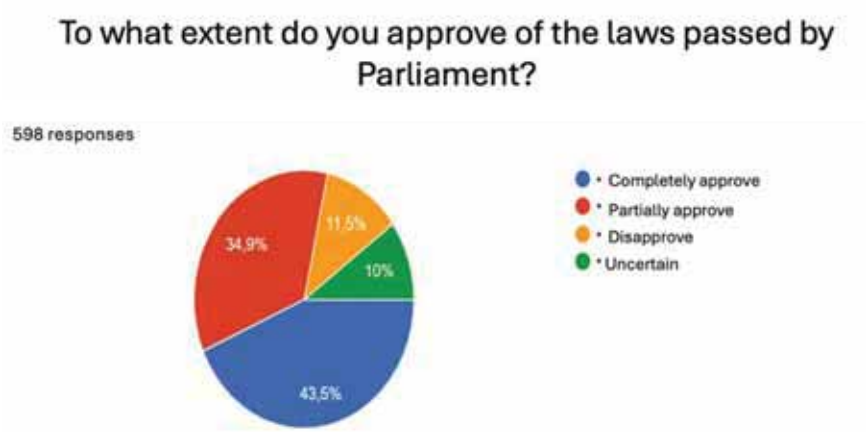

Figure 4. To what extent do you approve of the laws passed by Parliament?

To determine public satisfaction with parliamentary legislation, respondents were asked: "To what extent do you approve of the laws passed by Parliament?" (Figure 4). Results indicated that 43.5% fully approved, while 34.9% partially approved. However, 11.5% expressed complete disapproval, and 10% were uncertain. These findings indicate moderate approval levels alongside significant uncertainty or dissatisfaction, pointing to potential gaps in parliamentary transparency and communication. High levels of uncertainty (10%) emphasise limited public awareness and suggest shortcomings in parliamentary outreach. Comparative studies have shown that citizens support laws when Parliament is viewed as an independent and effective institution addressing societal needs.[48] Conversely, low confidence often arises in contexts where Parliament is perceived primarily as endorsing executive decisions without substantial input or scrutiny. Kazakhstan's executive-

47 Newton (n 17).
48 Whitmore (n 28).

dominated political context likely contributes to public perceptions of Parliament lacking genuine policymaking influence.

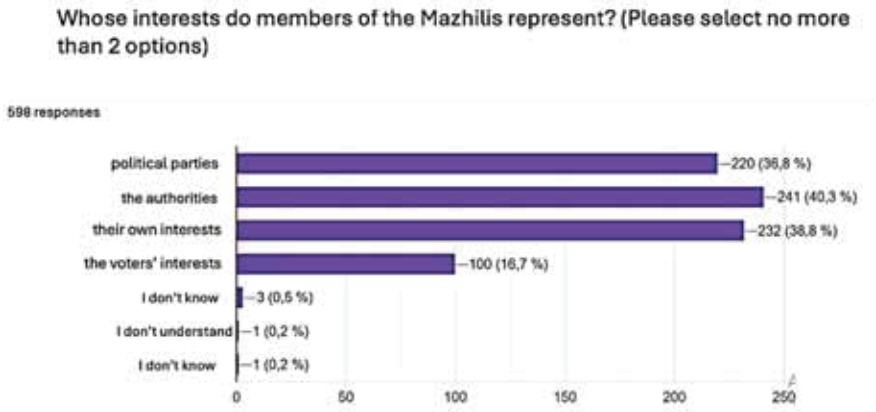

Figure 5. Whose interests do members of the Mazhilis represent?

To gain insight into how the population of Kazakhstan perceives the representational role of the Mazhilis, respondents were asked: "Whose interests do members of the Mazhilis represent?" (Figure 5). The most common response was "the authorities" (40.3%), followed by "political parties" (38.8%), and "their own interests" (36.8%). Alarmingly, only 16.7% of respondents believed that members of the Mazhilis represent "the voters' interests."

These responses indicate a significant lack of public trust in Parliament and its members. The data even calls into question the independence of parliament. It demonstrates the dependence of the Mazhilis on the executive or elite interests, rather than as a credible democratic institution.

Addressing these concerns requires deep institutional reforms aimed at restoring and strengthening public trust. Reforms should primarily focus on strengthening the expanded powers of parliamentary oversight to enhance checks and balances and address problems associated with executive dominance. In addition, public consultation procedures, such as public hearings and digital feedback platforms, can increase citizen participation in lawmaking, help align parliamentary activities with public interest, and increase public trust in the lawmaking process. Such reforms would enhance the authority of parliament and promote democratic accountability.

To understand how effectively Kazakhstan's Parliament interacts with citizens, respondents were asked to identify the political parties currently represented in the Mazhilis. The majority of respondents demonstrated a good level of awareness regarding the parliamentary composition, largely due to the significant administrative and media influence previously held by the Amanat Party (formerly Nur Otan). This recognition

highlights how dominant political parties with strong administrative backing can shape public awareness (Figure 6).

It is worth noting that the question allowed for multiple selections, which explains why the total number of responses (962) exceeds the number of individual respondents (598).

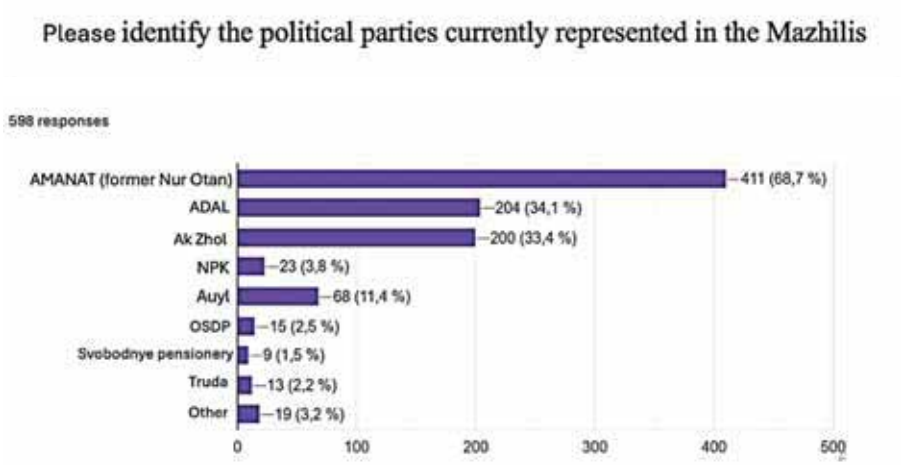

Figure 6. Political parties currently represented in the Mazhilis

The survey also evaluated the extent to which citizens are informed about their parliamentary representatives. Findings indicated that a substantial majority (58.2%) responded not knowing who their representatives in Parliament were, while an additional 11.7% were unsure. Only 30% of respondents indicated familiarity with their Senate representatives. These figures underline a concerning gap between parliamentarians and their constituents, pointing to insufficient direct interaction, transparency, and proactive engagement by parliamentary members.[49]

Accessibility is another crucial factor in assessing public engagement with parliamentary institutions. When questioned about Parliament's accessibility for public interaction, respondents presented varied perspectives (Figure 7): 25.3% viewed Parliament as accessible; 41.5% considered it partially accessible; 19.9% found it completely inaccessible; and 13.4% were uncertain.

49 Sarah Moulds, 'A Toolkit for Evaluating the Effectiveness of Parliamentary Public Engagement' (2023) 5 University of South Australia Law Review 1, doi:10.21913/uslrunisalr.v5.1661.

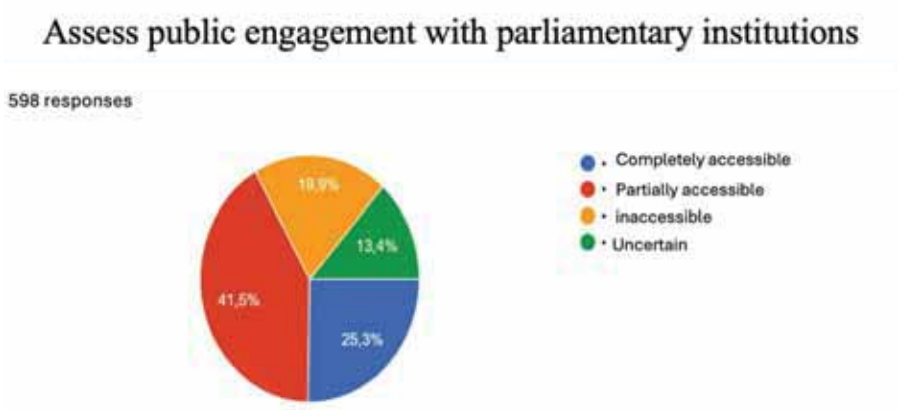

Figure 7. Assessing public engagement with parliamentary institutions

These results suggest significant barriers exist, limiting citizen participation in legislative processes and creating perceptions of distance between lawmakers and their constituents. Additionally, the survey explored the public's interest in Parliament's activities. Most respondents indicated relatively low engagement levels (Figure 8): 47.7% reported occasional interest; 20.7% expressed no interest; 9.2% were unsure; only 22.4% actively monitored parliamentary developments.

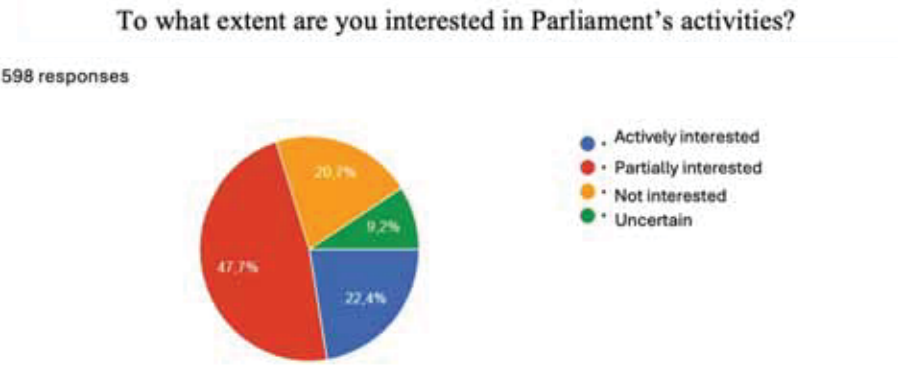

Figure 8. Public interest in Parliament activities

Such low engagement suggests a critical need for improved parliamentary communication strategies that foster transparency and actively involve citizens in the legislative process.[50] Furthermore, identifying citizens' primary sources of information regarding governmental activities can help inform strategies for increasing transparency. Survey responses revealed that 49.2% predominantly rely on internet sources and social media, 25.9% depend on international and regional media outlets, and 21.4% use central state media channels. The significant dependence on online and social media platforms indicates their central role in shaping public perceptions. However, the comparatively low reliance on official state media underscores a credibility challenge for government sources and indicates public preference for independent or alternative information channels.

These findings are consistent with broader international trends. For example, the European Commission's Spring 2024 Standard Eurobarometer revealed an overall decline in trust in national parliaments across the European Union. The most significant decreases were recorded in the Netherlands (-9 percentage points), Germany, and Ireland (both -8 percentage points).[51] This pattern highlights a global challenge in maintaining public trust in legislative institutions, as trust in parliaments is increasingly influenced by factors such as political transparency, socioeconomic disparities, and public perceptions of corruption.[52] The decline in trust reflects broader concerns about the ability of legislative bodies to represent citizens' interests, ensure government accountability, and effectively address pressing social and economic issues.

To better understand Kazakhstan's governance landscape, a comparison between trust in Parliament and trust in the judiciary is illuminating. A survey conducted by the Bureau of National Statistics in Kazakhstan in April-May 2024 found that 61.8% of respondents expressed trust in the judicial system[53]—a figure substantially higher than the levels of trust reported for Parliament in this study. In this context, it is important to note that the Parliament of Kazakhstan was actively involved in the approval of legislative amendments intended to protect judicial independence. These amendments focused on improving the

50 Carolyn M Hendriks and Adrian Kay, 'From "Opening Up" to Democratic Renewal: Deepening Public Engagement in Legislative Committees' (2019) 54(1) Government and Opposition 25, doi:10.1017/gov.2017.20; Nadine S Gibson and Aaron S King, 'The Promise and Peril of Constituent Interactions: The Determinants of Town Hall Participation Among Members of Congress' (2024) 49(4) Legislative Studies Quarterly 745, doi:10.1111/lsq.12454.

51 European Union, *Standard Eurobarometer 101 – Spring 2024: Public Opinion in the European Union* (EU 2024) <https://www.europa.eu/eurobarometer> accessed 5 February 2025.

52 van der Meer (n 34).

53 Department of Population Statistics, 'On the Level of Public Confidence in Law Enforcement Agencies and the Judicial System (April-May 2024)' (*Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 17 July 2024) <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/social-statistics/stat-crime/publications/183425/> accessed 5 February 2025.

independence of judges and improving the work of judicial bodies, including the exclusion of the preliminary consideration of cassation petitions in criminal and civil cases.[54]

Strong democratic governance relies on effective communication and open dialogue between parliamentary institutions and citizens. In established democracies, mechanisms such as consistent public debates, transparency, and interactive participation are fundamental.[55] The survey results reveal that Kazakhstan's Parliament must significantly enhance its transparency, outreach efforts, and mechanisms for citizen participation to bridge the existing trust gap between the legislature and the population. Potential solutions to address these identified challenges include increasing public consultations, enhancing media and communication strategies, improving accessibility and responsiveness, and expanding civic education campaigns.

6 CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to examine public perceptions of Parliament in Kazakhstan, focusing on public trust and accountability. The findings indicate that trust in Parliament remains significantly lower than in the President and the executive branch, with the institution often perceived as lacking autonomy and substantive influence in national administration. The President and the government's strong role in shaping socioeconomic policy strengthens this impression, positioning Parliament as a secondary actor in the political system.

The study also highlights a wide gap between parliamentarians and their constituents, as evidenced by low public awareness of parliamentary members, limited participation in legislative activities, and perceptions of inaccessibility. The reliance on social media and independent news sources for information about parliamentary matters indicates a credibility deficit for state media, hindering efforts to strengthen public trust in Parliament. Addressing the identified challenges requires multiple reforms. First, constitutional amendments should be considered to rebalance the power between the executive and legislative branches. To guarantee true legislative autonomy, the Parliament's role in initiating and approving legislation, particularly in budgetary and social policy matters, should be strengthened. Second, changes to the Law on political parties are required to foster political pluralism, promote fair competition, and encourage diverse voices to be represented in Parliament.

Equally crucial is strategic outreach and civic engagement. Parliament should prioritise direct communication with constituents through regular public briefings, interactive online

54 'Government of Kazakhstan Supported Second Block of Legislative Amendments on Judicial Reforms' (*Official Information Source of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan*, 13 December 2023) <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/government-of-kazakhstan-supported-second-block-of-legislative-amendments-on-judicial-reforms-26639?utm_source> accessed 5 February 2025.

55 Hendriks and Kay (n 50).

platforms, and constituency offices. Furthermore, long-term civic awareness can be facilitated through educational initiatives on the role and functions of Parliament, particularly in schools and universities. These reforms must aim to strengthen formal legislative powers and cultivate a participatory political environment that aligns with democratic principles and the aspirations of Kazakhstan's citizens.

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АНОТАЦІЯ УКРАЇНСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ

Дослідницька стаття

СПРИЙНЯТТЯ ГРОМАДСЬКІСТЮ РОЛІ ПАРЛАМЕНТІВ У СУЧАСНИХ ДЕМОКРАТІЯХ: ПІДЗВІТНІСТЬ ТА ДОВІРА ДО ПАРЛАМЕНТУ В КАЗАХСТАНІ

Арнат Ултанбаєв, Мухтар Толеген, Індіра Смайлова, Айжан Кожахметова, Арай Абільмажина та Аскар Шарапатов*

АНОТАЦІЯ

Вступ. *У демократичних суспільствах, що керуються верховенством права, парламент відіграє вирішальну роль, адже парламент приймає закони, забезпечує підзвітність уряду, виражає волю народу та співпрацює з місцевими громадами. Однак роль законодавчої гілки влади може суттєво відрізнятися залежно від політичної системи окремих країн. Казахстан є прикладом того, як президент і виконавча влада контролюють політичне життя країни, а роль парламенту ще не до кінця визначена і перебуває в процесі трансформації. Тому вкрай важливо зрозуміти сприйняття людьми ролі парламенту в контексті реформ, спрямованих на поглиблення демократизації суспільства.*

Методи. *У цьому дослідженні було застосовано кількісний підхід для того, щоб вивчити ставлення громадськості до парламенту, увагу було зосереджено на підзвітності та довірі. Опитування, проведене серед 598 респондентів, дало точне відображення громадської думки. Мета статті – оцінити довіру до державних органів, зокрема до парламенту, сприйняття відповідальності влади за соціально-економічну ситуацію в Казахстані, а також визначити чи задоволена громадськість роботою нинішнього парламенту та прийнятими ним законами. Дані були проаналізовані за допомогою методів описової статистики.*

Результати та висновки. *Результати дослідження свідчать про те, що довіра громадськості до законодавчого органу в Казахстані значно нижча, ніж до виконавчої гілки влади. Згідно з результатами, парламент сприймається як такий, що має обмежену автономію та вплив у соціально-економічному управлінні. Більшість респондентів вважають, що президент та уряд формують важливі державні рішення. У роботі було також показано, що більшість респондентів вважають, що парламентарі схильні представляти інтереси уряду або своїх політичних партій, а не виборців. Результати дослідження також висвітлили суттєвий розрив між законодавцями та громадськістю, оскільки багато респондентів навіть не знають, хто є їхніми представниками в парламенті. Ці результати підкреслюють нагальну потребу в реформах, які покращують парламентський нагляд, законодавчу незалежність та комунікації з громадськістю. Ця стаття є особливо важливою з огляду на ширші зобов'язання уряду щодо ініціативи «Держава, що слухає», метою якої є розширення участі громадськості в управлінні та прийнятті рішень.*

Ключові слова: *парламент, Казахстан, громадська довіра, політична підзвітність, реформа управління.*