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Origins of institutional trust in Kazakhstan

G.A. Makulbayeva¹, Zh.Zh. Davletbayeva*¹, M.M. Dyussenov², A.V. Zagrebin¹

¹Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan

²Astana IT University, Astana, Kazakhstan

(E-mail: ¹g.makulbayeva@apa.kz, ²zhuldyz.davletbayeva@apa.kz, ³mergend7@gmail.com,
⁴a.zagrebin@apa.kz)

Abstract. Kazakhstan has been experiencing a decline in citizens' institutional trust, particularly in Parliament, the courts, and the national government, over the past decade. There is an urgent need to investigate the factors that influence this erosion of trust. This study aims to examine the impact of perceived government performance and cultural factors on institutional trust in Kazakhstan. For that purpose, the study employs the World Values Survey's 7th wave for regression analysis. Institutional trust is captured through citizens' trust in Parliament, courts, and the national government. To measure the perceived government performance, this research employs variables such as corruption perception, income inequality, satisfaction with political system performance and satisfaction with the financial situation of the household at the individual level. Cultural factors have been captured through national pride, respect for authority and interpersonal trust. The findings demonstrate that satisfaction with a political system performance has a positive impact on institutional trust. In contrast, higher perception of corruption lowers the degree of trust in political institutions of Kazakhstan. With respect to cultural variables, national pride is positively associated with institutional trust. These findings have policy implications as to how improve the trust in national government, Parliament, and courts of Kazakhstan.

Keywords: institutional trust, performance, culture, authoritarian values, social trust

Introduction

Institutional trust is essential for both developing and developed countries and governments try to improve citizens' trust in various institutions as it contributes to regime's sustainability, economic prosperity and compliance with the law (Scholz & Lubell M., 2013). It is particularly critical for Kazakhstan as there is a growing dissatisfaction with the institutions and deteriorating socio-economic conditions (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022).

One of the common explanations found in the existing scholarship is "the trust-as-evaluation" approach. In other words, trust is an outcome of citizens' subjective evaluation of government performance (Easton, 1975; Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Easton emphasizes performance and claims that citizens' evaluation of performance determines the stock of trust in authorities and institutions (Easton, 1975). Likewise, scholars argue that good performance that produces substantive policy outcomes should generate high levels of trust in authorities and institutions (Van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). Scholars measure the subjective evaluation through citizens' perceptions of economic and political system performance, economic satisfaction, and household income (McAllister, 1999; Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). In the "trust-as-evaluation" approach, scholars pay attention to economic inequality as an explanatory variable (Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). Zmerli and Castillo's study on Latin America concludes that higher levels of objective income inequality (GINI index) are negatively associated with political trust, the perception of unfair income distribution also decreases trust in institutions and authorities (Zmerli & Castillo, 2015). The rising income inequality leads to a negative feeling toward the political system and thus it reduces the trust in public institutions. In the case of the EU intercountry inequality contributes to lower trust in EU institutions (Guinjoan & Rico, 2018). Previous studies on post-Soviet countries suggest that the performance of institutions is a good predictor of the varying degree of trust compared to cultural explanations (Mishler & Rose, 2001; McKee et al., 2013).

Another explanation of changing institutional trust is cultural factors such as authoritarian orientation, social trust and national pride. For example, more recently, scholars stress the pivotal role of authoritarian orientation as an independent determinant of trust in Asian societies (Ma & Yang, 2014; Baniamin et al., 2020). Similarly, Roger Sapsford and his colleagues also highlight the role of social cohesion as a determinant of trust in post-Soviet societies. There is some literature on political and institutional trust in Central Asia. Bekmagambetov et al. (2018) studied the relationship between political trust and protest behavior among Kazakhstani college students. Junisbai and Junisbai (2019) examined institutional trust in Central Asian countries, but their study does not include cultural factors as a potential predictor of trust in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Another research by McKee et al. conducted a survey in nine post-Soviet countries (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are included) between 2001 and 2010/2011 and revealed that institutional theory has a strong predicting power of trust (McKee et al., 2013). Similar to Mishler and Rose's study in post-communist Eastern and Central Europe and former Soviet Union states (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Nevertheless, there is no research that specifically focuses on Central Asian states and includes both explanations of cultural factors and perceived institutional performance to show the origins of institutional trust in this region. This quantitative inquiry addresses this gap in the literature.

This research aims to examine the impact of perceived government performance and cultural factors (independent variables of interest) on institutional trust (dependent variable) in Kazakhstan. This study draws on WVS and sets the following research question: “How do perceived government performance and cultural factors impact on institutional trust in Kazakhstan?” It defines institutional trust as citizens’ confidence toward the three political institutions namely the national government, parliament, and court system. In addition, in this study, we define cultural factors as authoritarian orientation, national pride and social trust. There is a body of research on social and political trust in post-Soviet countries, which primarily focuses on East Europe and Russia (Mishler & Rose, 2001; McKee et al., 2013). However, no one looked at the relationship between the institutional trust and cultural factors in the Central Asian setting, particularly in Kazakhstan.

Data and methodology

To evaluate the impact of perceived government performance and cultural factors on institutional trust in Kazakhstan, this study draws on the WVS 7th wave. The sample size is about 1,300 respondents. A multi-stage sampling procedure stratified by region and respondents’ location was implemented in Kazakhstan.

Prior studies that examine the origins of institutional and political trust in various contexts have used three proxy variables: confidence in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, particularly within the Asian context (Wong et al., 2011). These three institutions are essential and wield significant power in shaping major policies and strategies in Kazakhstan. Moreover, citizens are typically aware that street-level bureaucracies, such as the police or local governments, do not have determining power, as their role is primarily one of implementation. Therefore, this study also utilizes the commonly employed variables and measures institutional trust through Kazakhstani citizens’ confidence in the parliament, national government, and courts. An additive index was created on institutional trust, the Cronbach alpha scores of the institutional trust index exceed the conventionally accepted 0.70 thresholds (Appendix 2). To check the adequacy of the sample, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test has been employed and it exceeds 0.5, which means the sampling is adequate and sufficient for analysis (Field, 2013).

Table 1. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy

Variable	KMO
Confidence in government	0.7203
Confidence in parliament	0.7326
Confidence in courts	0.7443
Overall	0.7321

Existing research employs social trust, national pride and authoritarian values as cultural explanations for institutional and political trust [Godefroidt, 2017; Baniamin et al., 2020]. This study also uses them as independent variables for cultural explanation. In this study, we use social trust and interpersonal trust interchangeably. National pride is measured based on responses to the following questions: “How proud are you to be the nationality of this country?”

Answers range from 1 (I am not national) to 5 (very proud). The authoritarian orientation was measured through “Greater respect for authority”, where 1 indicates it as a “bad thing”, 2 means “don’t mind” and 3 means “good thing”. Social trust is captured through “Trust: people you meet for the first time” answers ranging from 1 (do not trust at all) to 4 (trust completely).

To measure perceived government performance, the study uses the following questions from WVS: satisfaction with the political system performance, perceptions of income inequality, satisfaction with the financial situation of the household, and corruption perception. Answers for satisfaction with political system performance range from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 10 (completely satisfied). With respect to income inequality, respondents were asked to evaluate the income differences where 1 indicates that the “income is more equal” and 10 means “larger income differences”. In addition, the study added the statement “Satisfaction with the financial situation of household” which is evaluated from 1(dissatisfied) and 10 (satisfied). Finally, corruption perception is measured through a 10-point scale where 1 implies “no corruption” and 10 means “abundant of corruption”. Control variables include the age.

The following regression model was estimated by OLS:

$$Trust_index_{ik} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 pride_{ik} + \beta_2 author_{ik} + \beta_3 interp.trust_{ik} + \beta_4 perf.sat_{ik} + \beta_5 fin.house_{ik} + \beta_6 age_{ik} + \beta_7 corrup_{ik} + \beta_8 income_ineq_{ik} + \epsilon_{ik}$$

In this formula, $Trust_index_{ik}$ is the institutional trust for the i th individual from the country. The formula includes interest independent variables and control variable such as age and ϵ_{ik} stands for the error term. Table 1 in Appendix 1 represents descriptive statistics for Kazakhstan.

Results

The OLS regression model has a good fit, according to R-squared, around 11% of variation in dependent variable is explained by the independent variables included into this regression model. Several independent variables are statistically significant (Table 3). Among these, one cultural factor – national pride – emerges as a key contributor to institutional trust. Additionally, satisfaction with the political system's performance positively influences institutional trust, while the perception of corruption has a statistically significant negative effect. All three variables – national pride, satisfaction with political system performance, and corruption perception – are highly significant at the 99% confidence level. Of the three, national pride has the highest coefficient, accounting for 0.26. These findings will be discussed further in the following section.

Table 3. OLS regressions on institutional trust (measured through composite index on confidence in courts, parliament, and government) in Kazakhstan

	Kazakhstan
Pride	0.2627***
	(0.0694)

Authoritarian orientation	-0.0152 (0.0505)
Interpersonal trust	0.0501 (0.0572)
Income inequality	0.0259 (0.0197)
Satisfaction with political system performance	0.0722*** (0.0226)
Satisfaction with the financial situation of household	0.0326 (0.0241)
Age	-0.0009 (0.0034)
Perception of corruption	-0.1397*** (0.0196)
Constant	-0.0238*** (0.3883)
Observations	1005
R-squared	0.1124

Note: Calculated by authors. Standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$. Statistically significant variables are highlighted.

Discussion and conclusion

Two perceived government performance variables – satisfaction with political system performance and corruption perception – are statistically significant in this model (Table 3). Firstly, satisfaction with the political system's performance is statistically very significant in predicting institutional trust in Kazakhstan. Institutional trust was measured through confidence in three branches – courts, parliament and national government, all three combined generate the overall political system. Assessment of these three institutions by citizens mainly relies on their satisfaction with the political system in the country. During the Nazarbayev regime, the state pursued an "economics first" policy but neglected the performance of the political system (Knox, 2008). Not surprisingly, according to the model, none of the economic indicators of perceived government performance (e.g., income inequality, household financial satisfaction) have a significant impact on institutional trust. Instead, it is the perceived satisfaction with the political system's performance that determines institutional trust. This suggests that, at this stage of development, improving institutional trust among citizens requires the implementation of meaningful reforms in the political system. These findings also resonate with other scholarship on regime legitimacy in Kazakhstan. Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022) argue that before the Covid-19 pandemic, the absence of contested elections or accountable governance, coupled with

the spread of patronal politics, left Kazakh citizens with little opportunity to influence political decision-making. This situation was further exacerbated by the worsening socio-economic conditions during the pandemic. It is important to note that the World Values data was collected prior to the onset of COVID-19, meaning that citizens' primary concerns at the time were related to the performance of the political system, a factor that is clearly reflected in the regression model (Table 3). This is why K.-J. Tokayev government placed greater emphasis on political reforms, particularly the introduction of consultative mechanisms, strengthening the role of the Majilis, diminishing the power of the President, and implementing changes to the party system. For example, the government reduced the number of signatures required to establish a political party to 5,000 and simplified the procedures for party registration; the state also introduced mixed elections for the Majilis (70% proportional and 30% majoritarian), and adopted a mixed system for regional representative bodies (50% proportional and 50% majoritarian) (Barro & Cornell, 2022; Isaacs, 2022; Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024). Secondly, the perception of corruption harms institutional trust (Table 3). While N. Nazarbayev's government (before 2019) was able to address petty corruption, primarily through digital mechanisms in public service (e.g., one-stop shops), grand corruption remained largely intact (Sharipova, 2020). Wealth generated from natural resources has been concentrated in the hands of a narrow group of individuals, and citizens often perceived this as symptoms of grand corruption. This perception has, in turn, contributed to a decline in institutional trust, particularly in the national government, courts, and parliament.

The findings indicate that, among cultural factors, national pride is the only one that positively impacts institutional trust. In the post-independence period, Kazakhstan has emphasized national identity projects to strengthen regime legitimacy. The government introduced several initiatives aimed at raising patriotism among the population, including *"Kazakhstan-2050,"* *"Mangilik El,"* and the *"Strategy 'Zhastar-Otanga!'"* (Ziegler, 2016). As a result, national pride is closely linked to institutional trust, as it forms a key element of the regime's legitimacy. This suggests that the national projects designed to promote patriotism also contribute to enhancing citizens' trust in institutions.

Other cultural variables, such as authoritarian orientation and interpersonal trust, do not contribute to institutional trust in Kazakhstan. Scholars argue that authoritarian and traditional values have deep roots and continue to persist in Central Asian states. According to Haerpfer and Kizilova (2020), although power is formally divided into three branches, legislative, judicial, and executive, in Central Asian countries, the executive branch and the President maintain dominance, reflecting the persistence of traditional (patriarchal) values in the region. During the economic hardship and ideological vacuum of the 1990s, people in Central Asia sought a strong leader who could restore stability and order, fostering a higher inclination to support an authoritarian leader. However, according to Inglehardt's post-materialism theory, individuals in affluent societies, with higher socioeconomic conditions, are more likely to reject authority and hierarchy (Inglehart & Abramson, 1999). Given Kazakhstan's status as a higher-middle-income country, Kazakhstani citizens' values have shifted from materialist toward self-assertive values. According to the World Values Survey, the stock of authoritarian values in Kazakhstan has decreased: in 2011, 54.7% of Kazakhstani respondents indicated that "greater respect for

authority" is a positive trait, but by 2020, this figure had fallen to 48% (World Bank Kazakhstan, n.a.). This suggests that, due to improved socioeconomic conditions, Kazakhstani citizens are increasingly rejecting hierarchy and authority. As self-assertive values rise, it becomes more difficult to convince the population to view the executive branch and political institutions as a rescuer. This implies that authoritarian values do not contribute to institutional trust. In countries with stronger authoritarian tendencies, such as China, citizens tend to have higher trust in institutions, as they view state institutions with less critical scrutiny.

The next cultural variable, interpersonal trust (or social trust), is not associated with institutional trust in Kazakhstan. Mishler and Rose's (2008) findings in post-communist societies show that interpersonal trust does not significantly impact institutional trust because, under the Communist regime, civil society organizations were tightly controlled, and these organizations are typically seen as the key platform for fostering interpersonal trust. As a result, there is little distinction between interpersonal trust and institutional trust in post-communist societies, including Kazakhstan. To this day, civil society in Kazakhstan remains largely under the control of state bodies, often referred to as a "state-led civil society." Interpersonal trust is usually cultivated through civil society, but since Kazakhstan's civil society resembles a state-directed model, interpersonal trust does not contribute significantly to institutional trust.

The following proxy variables for perceived government performance - income inequality and satisfaction with the financial situation of the household - are not significant in the regression model (Table 3). Regarding income inequality, according to the World Bank, Kazakhstan's GINI index accounted for 27.8 in 2018 and Kazakhstan witnessed substantial improvements in income inequality over the last two decades. GINI index of income inequality accounted for 30.2, and it has gradually declined to 27.8 in 2018 [26]. Also, Van der Meer argues that when we control corruption, income inequality does not impact political and institutional trust (Van der Meer, 2017). This implies that once the corruption is well addressed, the income inequality does not concern Kazakh citizens. Finally, the regression model shows that satisfaction with the financial situation of households does not impact the institutional trust. The World Values Survey data was collected in 2018, which is before the Covid-2018 and worsening geopolitical situations. Thus, it does not capture the more recent trend with respect to socio-economic conditions in Kazakhstan. We, therefore, acknowledge that more recent data will challenge these findings because the pandemic has obviously exacerbated the economic situation for many social groups and the current rise in oil and gas prices also negatively impact on household's financial situation, which has a close relationship with institutional trust (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022). This finding, therefore, requires further thorough research referring to a more recent data in the country.

Regardless of outdated data and some limitations, this article makes a valuable contribution to the existing literature on institutional trust in the Central Asian context. In addition to the impact of endogenous variables, such as satisfaction with the political system's performance and satisfaction with the household's financial situation, this study also explores the effects of exogenous variables like interpersonal trust, national pride, and authoritarian orientation on institutional trust. The empirical findings suggest that both endogenous and exogenous variables influence institutional trust to some extent. Specifically, perceptions of corruption and satisfaction with the political system performance have a significant impact on trust in

institutions. Therefore, the state should take more stringent measures to address grand corruption and enhance the political system performance. Regarding cultural factors, while authoritarian values and interpersonal trust do not impact on institutional trust, national pride emerges as a key factor that contributes to institutional trust and, consequently, strengthens the regime's legitimacy. Policymakers should thus prioritize initiatives that foster national pride among Kazakhstani citizens.

Contribution of authors

Makulbayeva G. is the leading author who defined the research design of this research. **Davletbayeva Zh.** managed the data and conducted a regression analysis. **Zagrebin A.** and **Dyussenov M.** contributed to the data analysis and revised the final paper.

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Г.А. Макулбаева¹, Ж.Ж. Давлетбаева*¹, М.М. Дюсенов², А.В. Загребин¹

¹*Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясы,
Астана, Қазақстан*

²*Astana IT University, Астана, Қазақстан*

Қазақстандағы институттарға сенімнің негіздері

Аңдатпа. Қазақстанда соңғы он жылда азаматтардың, әсіресе, Парламентке, сотқа және ұлттық үкіметке институттық сенімінің төмендеуі байқалады. Оған әсер ететін факторларды зерттеу қажеттілігі бар. Бұл мақала азаматтардың үкіметтің қызметіне бағалау және мәдени факторлар институционалдық қызметке қалай әсер ететінін зерттеуге бағытталған. Осы мақсатта Дүниежүзілік құндылықтар сауалнамасының 7-ші толқынынан алынған деректер пайдаланылады. Институционалды сенім ұғымы азаматтардың Қазақстан Парламентіне, сот жүйесіне және үкіметке деген сенімімен өлшенеді. Мемлекеттің тиімділігін өлшеу үшін бұл зерттеуде сыбайлас жемқорлықты, табыс теңсіздігін, саяси жүйенің жұмысына қанағаттану және жеке деңгейдегі үй шаруашылығының қаржылық жағдайына қанағаттану сияқты факторлар қолданылады. Мәдени факторларды өлшеу үшін ұлттық мақтаныш, билікті құрметтеу және әлеуметтік сенім ұғымдары қолданылады. Зерттеу нәтижесі Қазақстандағы азаматтардың саяси жүйенің жұмысына қанағаттануы институционалдық сенімге оң әсер ететінін көрсетеді. Яғни азаматтар саяси жүйенің жұмысына қанағаттануы олардың сот жүйесіне, Парламентке және үкіметке деген сенімін арттырады. Керісінше, азаматтардың сыбайлас жемқорлықтың бар екенін сезінуі аталған үш институтқа деген сенімді төмендетеді. Мәдени факторларға қатысты ұлттық мақтаныш үш институтқа деген сенімді арттырады. Осы нәтиже негізінде бұл зерттеу азаматтардың Ұлттық үкіметке, Парламентке және сот жүйесіне сенімін қалай арттыру қажеттігі туралы ұсыныстар жасайды.

Негізгі ұғымдар: институционалдық сенім, мемлекеттің тиімділігі, мәдениет, авторитарлық құндылықтар, әлеуметтік сенім

Г.А. Макулбаева¹, Ж.Ж. Давлетбаева*¹, М.М. Дюсенов², А.В. Загребин¹

¹*Академия государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан,
Астана, Казахстан*

²*Astana IT University, Астана, Казахстан*

Основы доверия к институтам в Казахстане

Аннотация. За последнее десятилетие в Казахстане наблюдается снижение институционального доверия граждан, особенно к парламенту, судебной системе и национальному правительству. Это создает острую необходимость в исследовании факторов, влияющих на эту эрозию доверия. Цель данного исследования – анализ влияния воспринимаемой эффективности правительства и культурных факторов на институциональное доверие в Казахстане. С этой целью в работе используются данные, полученные в ходе 7-й волны Всемирного исследования

ценностей для регрессионного анализа. Институциональное доверие измеряется как доверие граждан к парламенту, судам и национальному правительству Казахстана. Для измерения эффективности работы правительства в этом исследовании используются такие переменные, как восприятие коррупции, неравенство доходов, удовлетворенность эффективностью политической системы и финансовым положением домохозяйств. Культурные факторы отражаются как национальная гордость, уважение к власти и социальное доверие. Результаты показывают, что удовлетворенность эффективностью политической системы оказывает положительное влияние на институциональное доверие. Напротив, более высокое восприятие коррупции снижает степень доверия к политическим институтам Казахстана. Что касается культурных факторов, национальная гордость положительно влияет на институциональное доверие. На основании этих выводов в исследовании даны рекомендации о том, как повысить доверие граждан к правительству, парламенту и судебной системе Казахстана.

Ключевые слова: институциональное доверие, эффективность государства, культура, авторитарные ценности, социальное доверие.

Information about authors

Gulnur Makulbayeva – PhD, Associate professor, National School of Public Policy of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Abai Avenue 33a, 010000, Astana, Kazakhstan

Zhuldyz Davletbayeva – corresponding author, Candidate of Sociological Sciences, Professor, National School of Public Policy of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Abai Avenue 33a, 010000, Astana, Kazakhstan

Dyussenov Mergen – PhD, Assistant Professor, Astana IT University, Mangilik El str., 010000, Astana, Kazakhstan

Alexandr Zagrebin – doctoral student, Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Abai Avenue 33a, 010000, Astana, Kazakhstan

Авторлар туралы мәлімет

Макулбаева Гүлнұр Азимхановна – PhD, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясының Мемлекеттік саясаттың ұлттық мектебінің доценті, Абай даңғылы 33а, 010000, Астана, Қазақстан

Давлетбаева Жұлдыз Жетпісбаевна – хат-хабар авторы, әлеуметтану ғылымдарының кандидаты, Қазақстан Республикасы Президентінің жанындағы Мемлекеттік басқару академиясының Мемлекеттік саясаттың ұлттық мектебінің профессоры, Абай даңғылы 33а, 010000, Астана, Қазақстан

Дюсенов Мergen Мирзаятович – PhD, Astana IT University ассистент профессоры, Мәңгілік Ел көшесі, 010000, Астана, Қазақстан

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Сведения об авторах

Макулбаева Гульнур Азимхановна – PhD, доцент Национальной школы государственной политики Академии государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, проспект Абая, 33а, 010000, Астана, Казахстан.

Давлетбаева Жулдыз Жетпысбаевна – автор для корреспонденции, кандидат социологических наук, профессор Национальной школы государственной политики Академии государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, проспект Абая, 33а, 010000, Астана, Казахстан.

Дюсенов Мерген Мирзаятович – PhD, ассистент профессора Astana IT University, улица Мангилик Ел, 010000, Астана, Казахстан.

Загребин Александр Витальевич – докторант Академии государственного управления при Президенте Республики Казахстан, проспект Абая, 33а, 010000, Астана, Казахстан.

Appendix 1 Descriptive Statistics, Kazakhstan

Variable	Mean	Sd	Min	Max	Obs
Authoritarian orientation	2.21	0.90	1	3	1,276
Satisfaction with the financial situation of household	6.14	2.18	1	10	1,276
Satisfaction with political system performance	6.33	2.22	1	10	1,276
Pride	4.39	0.68	1	5	1,276
Interpersonal trust	1.83	0.79	1	4	1,276
Income inequality	7.33	2.39	1	10	1,276
Age	41.24	14.21	18	86	1,276
Perception of corruption	6.97	2.26	1	10	1,276
Institutional trust index	1.33e-08	1.51	-3.861	2.472	1,276

Appendix 2 Cronbach alpha, Kazakhstan

Item	Obs	Sign	Item-test correlation	Item-test correlation	Average interim covariance	Alpha
Confidence in Courts	1,177	+	0.8743	0.7043	0.5450644	0.8030
Confidence: government	1,177	+	0.8834	0.7277	0.5308788	0.7821
Confidence: Parliament	1,165	+	0.8752	0.7158	0.5508613	0.7928
Test scale					0.5422863	0.8515