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Exploring Civil Servants' Communicative Competencies in Government-Public Interactions: The Case of Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This study analyses the communicative competencies of civil servants in Kazakhstan, highlighting the crucial role of effective communication in fostering public trust and enhancing democratic engagement. Utilizing qualitative focus group discussions with 32 experts, the research identified key deficiencies, including reliance on bureaucratic language, a lack of empathy, and inadequate crisis communication skills. These issues underscore the pressing need for communication strategies tailored to the Kazakhstani context. The study points to the necessity of developing Kazakhstan-specific communication frameworks and emphasizes the importance of improving training programs and promoting emotional intelligence among civil servants. By enhancing internal communication processes and clarifying responsibilities, government employees can better serve the public, fostering a more transparent, responsive, and participatory government. This research offers a valuable foundation for future initiatives aimed at refining the communicative competencies of civil servants in Kazakhstan, suggesting pathways for implementing targeted improvements and developing more effective communication practices within the public sector. Through these efforts, the study aims to contribute to the creation of a government that not only addresses public needs more efficiently but also actively engages citizens in the democratic process, ultimately strengthening the relationship between the state and its people.

Keywords: *Civil servants, communicative competence, communication skills, Kazakhstan, public interaction.*

Introduction

The effectiveness of a state's governance and its democratic integrity are closely tied to the capacity of government institutions to engage in transparent communication, respond promptly to citizen inquiries, and foster active public participation in decision-making processes (OECD, 2016). Effective communication within government institutions is vital for addressing citizens'

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needs, ensuring accurate information dissemination, and facilitating meaningful interaction between state authorities and the public (OECD, 2021). This underscores the necessity for robust communicative skills among civil servants, which extend beyond the traditional roles of government press services.

In Kazakhstan, the civil service system is designed to promote openness, service orientation, and a human-centric approach, with a strong emphasis on public engagement. The Kazakhstani government has introduced the "Hearing State" initiative to enhance dialogue with citizens and ensure timely responses to public inquiries (Tokayev, 2019). This initiative reflects a commitment to service-oriented governance, advocating for political and administrative reforms aimed at improving the responsiveness and effectiveness of the public sector.

Recent research by Kazakhstani scholars highlights a critical issue: the low level of interaction between government officials and the public due to insufficient communicative competencies among civil servants (Sadykova, 2022). A sociological study conducted by the Eurasian Integration Institute in the context of the "Hearing State" concept further reveals significant problems in the informational and communicative activities of Kazakhstani government bodies. This study found that over 32% of respondents identified the absence of unified rules and principles for information and communication policy, 49% noted a lack of promptness in determining specific decisions and events, and 55% highlighted the failure to consider the informational needs of different population groups. Overall, 60% of respondents pointed to inadequate communication skills among government officials (Sairov, 2020). These findings underscore the challenges faced in achieving effective public engagement and the need for substantial improvements in communicative practices.

The rapid advancement of technology presents both challenges and opportunities for civil servants. As digital transformation and automation reshape the public sector, there is an urgent need for civil servants to continuously update their skills to effectively navigate these changes (Dobryakova et al., 2020; Bokayev et al., 2023a). Despite extensive research on the communicative competencies of government officials, the presence of a significant gap in studies addressing contemporary challenges and providing actionable recommendations for improvement is observed.

Previous literature highlights the central role of communication in government operations, noting that effective communication enhances collaboration, public engagement, and successful policy implementation (Macnamara, 2016). Yet, there is a notable gap in understanding the specific

communicative competencies required for effective public interaction, particularly in the context of emerging technologies and evolving public expectations (Grube, 2014; Sauer et al., 2021; Yermekova et al., 2024).

This study seeks to bridge this gap by addressing the following research questions:

1. What challenges and problems do civil servants encounter during interactions with the public?
2. What are the critical communication competencies necessary for effective public interaction?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to provide valuable insights into the development of communicative competencies among Kazakhstani civil servants, ultimately contributing to enhanced public sector performance and fostering a more responsive and participatory government.

Literature review

The challenges and problems that civil servants encounter during interactions with the public

According to Blijleven &Hulst (2020), civil officials encounter challenges, such as a lack of public trust in government institutions, when engaging in communication with the general public. The spread of disinformation on social networks and in the media makes this feasible (Urban, 2023). On the other hand, the state's ineffective communication approach partially contributes to citizens' lack of trust. A vicious circle exacerbates the problem as individuals, lacking confidence, disregard the state's directives. This leads to societal division, which can have disastrous consequences during a crisis.

Inadequate information management systems, coupled with bureaucratic resistance and a lack of established procedures, compromise essential public trust by reducing transparency (Androniceanu, 2021). Governments frequently struggle to deliver adequate information to the public due to a lack of transparency, weak information management procedures, and a non-perception of government bodies as reliable sources of information (Gunnlaugsdottir, J., 2016; Ismailova et al., 2023a; Bokayev et al., 2022b).

Analyzing government servant abilities during the epidemic shows that several factors hindered public interaction. Contradictory messages from various authorities caused public confusion and

mistrust. The absence of a synchronized and uniform communication strategy undermined efforts to adequately disseminate information to the public. Delays and inaccuracies in the dissemination of critical information impeded public understanding and compliance. Insufficient empathy was ineffective in reducing social anxiety (Sauer et al., 2021).

Facilitating communication across government agencies is an essential element for effectively engaging with the public. Open and efficient communication across government agencies improves public confidence in their competence and motivations (Oomsels et al., 2016).

Budgetary constraints frequently impede the development of effective interactions, as researchers argue that the involvement of communication professionals is crucial (Urban, 2023). The relatively low salaries of civil personnel may contribute to government bodies' insufficient competitiveness in communications development compared to the private sector.

Bureaucratic mandates and the duty to execute directives from higher authorities frequently impede public officials' inclination to establish a dialogue with citizens, considering their expectations (Bartels, 2016; Erkkilä & Luoma-aho, 2023). The civil servant faces challenges in effectively integrating policy and program implementation at the local level while adhering to formal norms, policies, and procedures. The requirement for civil officials to simultaneously understand the concerns of the public and adhere to the official principles of the governmental body they represent adds complexity to the situation (Ismailova et al., 2023b).

Workers from central government agencies and locals who interact directly with citizens employ different communication strategies. Frontline civil servants rely on their understanding of local contexts and improvisational interactions. In contrast, civil officials of central agencies work within bureaucratic frameworks, concentrating on policy implementation and internal protocols (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021).

The state uses a variety of communication channels to engage with multi-vector foreign policy (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024) and its own society, which encourages government officials to include them in their professional endeavors. Simultaneously, the public servant must communicate in a manner that is comprehensible and approachable to citizens, with the aim of encouraging society to provide constructive feedback (Braji, 2023; Bartels, 2016).

The digitalization of public services and the popularization of social networks have numerous positive effects on citizens' engagement in public administration. The target audiences, who may lack access to or knowledge of modern technologies, could be unreachable. In this regard, the

media (television, newspapers, and radio) and live communication continue to significantly impact communication with the public (Macnamara, 2017). Thus, the wide range of communication channels necessitates that civil workers acquire a variety of competencies directly linked to communication qualifications. This distinguishes oratory skills and social media administration as essential attributes needed to withstand public scrutiny and successfully interact with the public on various platforms (Grube, 2014).

Important communication competencies for effective interaction with the public

A civil servant's competencies are the skills, knowledge, and abilities that are essential for the effective execution of professional activities in order to achieve the objectives of a government agency (OECD, 2017).

Despite existing research, there are significant gaps in the assessing of communication competencies in public administration and public service. These gaps often result in recommendations limited to establishing effective communication practices as outlined in reference books and guides (OECD, 2016; UK Government, 2021; GCS, 2023; CISA, 2019).

Public sector workers should exhibit communicative competence by completing tasks and satisfying business communication standards in their field (Bokayev & Amirova, 2023: Bokayev et al., 2024c). In Kazakhstan, while the legislation establishes ethical requirements for civil servants, there is no explicit clarification about the required communication competencies for government officials (On the Civil Service of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015).

Public servants should be trained to clearly deliver correct messages that are both motivating and realistic to ensure the public is informed and ready to take necessary precautions (Johnston et al., 2020). Along with communication skills, the ability to formulate an accurate message is also essential for effective management of the public's expectations. Incorrect context may lead to unforeseen consequences, as the general public is unprepared to address particular situations.

Civil servants with a high public service motivation are inclined to adjust their communication strategies, especially during crises, to effectively fulfil both urgent operational needs and public expectations. This, in turn, improves the overall quality of communication (Broekema et al., 2019).

Another important component in communication is genuine desire to serve the public and match personal activities with the public interest. This idea indicates that the public examines government officials' soft skills personal traits, and goals, which strengthens public trust.

As analyzed by Kruyen & Van Genugten (2019), communication skills, especially persuasive public speaking, concise writing, and the ability to explain complicated topics, promote public trust and involvement. Sympathetic interaction and attentive listening are essential for effectively engaging with the public. Effective collaboration with government bodies, NGOs, and the public improves the efficiency of service delivery and the management of public expectations. Maintaining ethical values and integrity ensures the trust and accountability of the public (Kruyen&Van Genugten, 2019).

One criticism from researchers is that nearly all the government communications are one-sided and primarily rhetorical. Simultaneously, government agencies rarely acknowledge the significance of the second component of communication, which is the "hearing factor" (Macnamara, 2017).

Some researchers emphasize the importance of both professional and emotional competencies in enhancing the adaptability of civil servants in modern public administration (Borisova, 2015). Several studies (Choi & Guy, 2020; Edlins, 2019; Hansen, 2021) have demonstrated that government officials' empathy is key to public involvement. Even a single interaction with a public servant can significantly affect a citizen's trust in a government entity, according to survey trials (Hansen, 2021).

Strengthening communication skills can be a powerful way to improve the performance of the public sector. HR specialists are increasingly establishing criteria for qualified personnel recruitment, demonstrating the significance of communication skills in civil servants' professional activities (Martynova & Evarovich, 2021; OECD, 2017; OECD, 2016). By focusing on these competencies, the public sector can enhance its effectiveness and better meet the needs of its constituents.

Method

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, employing a series of focus groups (n=32) to investigate the communicative abilities of government servants in Kazakhstan. This design was selected for its suitability in exploring complex, situation-specific communication competencies. Focus groups facilitated an interactive environment where participants could share opinions and

experiences on civil servants' communication skills. This method was deemed appropriate as it allowed for in-depth discussion and provided richer qualitative insights compared to surveys or questionnaires (Morgan, 2020).

The focus group approach enabled participants to discuss and clarify their perspectives on communication competencies, which helped in defining a comprehensive understanding of the topic. This method is particularly effective for examining multifaceted interactions and understanding the nuances of communication practices.

The study focused on several key variables:

1) Public Speaking Skills: Evaluating civil servants' abilities to communicate effectively in public settings.
2) Clarity of Expression: Assessing how clearly civil servants convey information.
3) Emotional Intelligence: Understanding how well civil servants manage and express emotions in their communication.

These variables are critical for assessing the effectiveness of civil servants' communication roles and their engagement with the public.

Focus groups were instrumental in identifying both common themes and divergent viewpoints among experts. This design choice facilitated the examination of a wide range of communication competencies and provided insights into different experiences and perspectives (Kitzinger, 2021). By analyzing these interactions, the study aimed to uncover both convergent and divergent opinions, offering a comprehensive understanding of communication practices within public administration.

The thematic analysis of focus group discussions, conducted using Dedoose software, allowed for a structured identification of significant themes and patterns. This qualitative approach was suited for exploring the subjective nature of communication competencies, focusing on the deeper meanings of participants' responses rather than quantifying them (Wilkinson, 1999).

Overall, the focus group design was chosen for its ability to facilitate detailed and interactive discussions, making it possible to explore intricate topics such as communication competencies in a nuanced and contextualized manner. This method provided valuable insights into the underlying causes of communication challenges faced by civil servants and informed recommendations for improving government-citizen interactions (Finch & Lewis, 2019; Bryman, 2020).

Population and Sample/ Study Group/Participants

Participants in this study were civil servants and experts in the fields of public administration and communications. According to Hoppe et al. (1995), focus groups are most effective when participants share key common characteristics, especially when discussing sensitive or controversial issues. With this principle in mind, we ensured that the composition of the focus groups was carefully considered to maintain homogeneity among respondents. Specifically, all participants had prior expertise in communication and were well-acquainted with the study's subject matter.

The focus groups were strategically divided into two main categories: communication experts and civil servants. This division allowed for a rich exchange of perspectives, as both groups brought diverse practical and theoretical knowledge to the discussions. By integrating various viewpoints, the study aimed to capture a broad range of insights and ideas related to professional communication competencies.

To ensure the thoroughness of the study, we applied specific criteria for participant selection based on the concept of homogeneity. Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

1. Minimum Age Requirement: Participants had to be at least 25 years old. This criterion was set to ensure that individuals had sufficient professional experience and maturity.
2. Experience Requirement: Civil servants needed a minimum of 5 years of service experience, or alternatively, at least 5 years of experience working with or teaching government servants; Experts needed a minimum of 5 years of professional experience in developing and studying communicative competencies for civil servants, interacting with public sector representatives, and creating communication strategies for organizations.
3. Educational Qualification: All participants were required to have higher education.

By conducting three focus groups with carefully selected participants, we were able to explore the issues from multiple angles and gather comprehensive data to enhance professional communication competencies. The diverse composition of the focus groups was intended to form consistent collective semantic constructs through repeated discussions on the same issues under similar conditions.

For participant selection, we utilized the "snowball sampling" method. The division of focus groups was based on participants' level of expertise and proficiency in Kazakh and Russian

languages. Given that the majority of Kazakhstan's population speaks both languages, and considering the constitutional right enshrined in the Constitution of Kazakhstan (1995), the study was conducted in both Kazakh and Russian to ensure inclusivity and relevance to the broader population.

Table 1

Demographic and Professional Profile of Participants Across Focus Groups (%)

Occupation	Gender	Age	Work Experience	Degree
NGO	Female:62.5 Male: 37.5	25-29: 0 30-39: 37.5 40-49: 50 50-59: 12.5	1-10 years: 50 11-20 years: 50	PhD: 37.5 Master: 50 Bachelor:12.5
Civil Service	Female: 30.8 Male: 69.2	25-29: 38.5 30-39: 38.5 40-49: 15.4 50-59: 7.7	1-10 years: 76.9 11-20 years: 23.1	PhD: 23 Master: 38.5 Bachelor: 38.5
Civil Service	Female:72.7 Male: 27.3	25-29: 18.2 30-39: 36.4 40-49: 36.4 50-59: 9	1-10 years: 36.4 11-20 years: 63.6	PhD: 36.4 Master: 36.4 Bachelor: 27.2

Source: Created by authors

Overall, the sample across all focus groups represents a diverse array of professionals with substantial experience and advanced academic qualifications. The balanced gender distribution, coupled with the participants' extensive experience and high level of education, provides a strong foundation for analyzing communicative competencies and strategies within their respective fields. The variation in age and gender among the groups contributes to a well-rounded and multifaceted discussion (Table 1).

Data Collection Tools

To effectively gather data through focus group discussions (FGDs), the study utilized a meticulously designed FGD guide as the primary research instrument. This guide was carefully developed to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the communication proficiencies of government officials. The FGD guide consisted of questionnaire - a structured set of questions organized into three main thematic areas.

1) Communicative Competencies of Government Officials: This section aimed to explore participants' definitions and understandings of essential communication skills required in public service. It included questions designed to probe the participants' perceptions of key communicative abilities and their importance in the context of government roles.

2) Channels and Means of Communication: The second section focused on evaluating various communication tools and channels. The questions in this segment assessed the effectiveness and appropriateness of different communication methods in various scenarios encountered by government officials.

3) Communication Strategies: The final segment analyzed the strategies employed by government officials in their communication efforts. It included questions that examined the implementation of these strategies, as well as the rationale behind choosing specific techniques for particular situations.

The FGD guide was validated through expert judgment to ensure its relevance and effectiveness during the pilot test process. Experts in public administration and communication reviewed the guide to assess the clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness of the questions. Their feedback led to refinements in the guide, ensuring that it accurately addressed the research objectives and provided a robust framework for the discussions.

The structured format of the FGD guide facilitated a thorough examination of the key topics pertinent to the research. By organizing the focus group discussion into four distinct stages—Introduction, Preparation, In-Depth Questions, and Conclusion—the guide ensured a systematic and comprehensive approach to data collection. This structure allowed for an organized exploration of communication practices and strategies while providing a clear framework for participants to contribute their insights.

Data Collection

Data were collected through both online and offline focus group discussions, employing distinct methods to ensure comprehensive coverage of the research topics.

1) Online Focus Group: An online focus group was conducted using Microsoft Teams, which facilitated flexibility and accessibility for participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014). This session included eight experts and lasted 2 hours and 15 minutes. The online format allowed for real-time interaction and was particularly useful for participants who could not attend in person. During the

session, discussions were recorded using Microsoft Teams' built-in recording feature, ensuring all verbal interactions were captured for later analysis.

2) Offline Focus Groups: Two offline focus groups were conducted with civil servants. The first group comprised 11 participants, and the second group included 13 participants. Each offline session lasted approximately 3 hours and 30 minutes. These face-to-face meetings provided the opportunity to observe non-verbal cues and interactions, enriching the data with additional context (Richard et al., 2021). Audio recordings of these discussions were made using digital voice recorders, and video recordings were also captured to analyze non-verbal communication.

All recorded focus group sessions, both online and offline, were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of the discussions. The transcripts were meticulously reviewed for accuracy before being subjected to a detailed coding scheme. The thematic analysis proceeded through several key steps:

Initially, codes were generated from the transcripts, focusing on recurring topics and patterns identified within the data. These initial codes were then grouped into broader themes based on their relevance to the research questions. This process involved pinpointing key themes related to communicative competencies, channels of communication, and communication strategies. Finally, the identified themes were mapped to ensure that all significant aspects of the discussions were captured and aligned with the research objectives, providing a comprehensive analysis of the focus group data.

The focus group with experts was held online on February 24, 2023. It included eight participants with significant experience in developing and studying communicative competencies for civil servants, engaging with public sector representatives, and crafting communication strategies for organizations. The second focus group took place offline on February 27, 2023. Although 14 participants were anticipated, 11 attended due to various reasons. The third focus group was also held offline on February 28, 2023. The expected number of participants was 14, but 13 attended due to similar reasons. The table provides a detailed breakdown of participants across the three focus groups, showcasing experts from NGOs and civil servants.

The sample offers a thorough view of participants' demographics and professional backgrounds. Focus Group 1 consists of 8 experts from NGOs, ranging in age from 31 to 50 years. The group includes 6 females and 2 males. Participants have 6 to 20 years of experience in the NGO sector. Academically, the group is well-educated: 4 participants hold PhDs, 4 have Master’s degrees, and

1 has a Bachelor's degree. This combination of extensive experience and advanced degrees indicates a high level of expertise and insight in the NGO sector. The predominance of females may influence the perspectives and insights shared during the discussions. Focus Group 2 includes 21 civil servants, aged between 25 and 46 years. The gender distribution is nearly equal, with 11 females and 10 males. Participants possess 5 to 15 years of experience in civil service. Their academic qualifications vary: 4 hold PhDs, 12 have Master's degrees, and 5 have Bachelor's degrees. The relatively young age of the participants, coupled with their considerable experience, reflects a mix of emerging professionals and mid-career individuals. The nearly equal gender distribution is likely to contribute to a balanced and comprehensive discussion. Focus Group 3 features 11 civil servants, aged from 25 to 50 years. The gender distribution is slightly skewed, with 6 females and 5 males. Participants have 5 to 15 years of experience in civil service. Their educational backgrounds are diverse: 4 hold PhDs, 6 have Master's degrees, and 1 has a Bachelor's degree. This group's demographic profile is similar to Focus Group 2 in terms of experience and age, but with a slightly different gender balance. The group's qualifications and experience levels ensure that the discussions will be enriched by a wide range of perspectives and expertise (Table 1).

Data Analysis

The focus group discussions were analyzed in detail using Dedoose software. The initial step in utilizing Dedoose software involved transforming textual data into a coherent narrative by loading data into Dedoose (Salmona et al., 2021). Descriptors can be used to arrange data, creating a narrative context that is in line with research goals. The versatility of Dedoose in handling mixed methods data is widely acknowledged (Lieber, 2016).

Subsequently, themes based on research questions are identified. After analyzing the qualitative data, codes are generated to represent the recurring primary concepts. Dedoose's coding tool enables users to methodically link codes to pertinent data segments, enabling a systematic approach to theme analysis (Lieber & Weisner, 2013).

While implementing these codes into the data, it may be necessary to revise them if they do not align well or if new patterns arise. Dedoose facilitates smooth updating, accommodating the iterative aspect of qualitative research, and guaranteeing that the codes faithfully correspond to the data and research inquiries (Saldana, 2021; Salmona et al., 2021).

Finally, after coding, you can filter and analyze specific subsets of your data in Dedoose, focusing on particular themes or variables. This feature helps generate detailed, targeted reports and narratives, enhancing the relevance and depth of your analysis (Lieber, 2016).

Once the coding is completed, Dedoose allows to selectively filter and analyze certain subsets of the data, with a special emphasis on themes or factors of interest. This functionality facilitates the creation of comprehensive and focused reports and narratives, hence improving the pertinence and thoroughness of the analysis (Lieber, 2016).

The data analysis process followed a structured approach comprising six key stages. First, the focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed, converting audio recordings into text, either manually or using transcription software. The transcripts were meticulously reviewed to ensure accuracy and completeness, capturing all nuances of the discussions. Next, the transcriptions were uploaded into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis tool, where a coding scheme was developed to represent the key themes, concepts, and research objectives of the study. This scheme provided a systematic framework for data analysis. In the coding stage, segments of the transcript were tagged with predefined codes, with new codes introduced and existing ones refined as patterns and insights emerged. For consistency, inter-coder reliability checks were conducted when multiple researchers were involved. Dedoose was then used to manage and organize the coded data efficiently, allowing researchers to group and filter codes, apply analytical memos, and create visualizations such as charts and graphs. Thematic and comparative analyses were performed to identify and explore prominent themes and patterns across the focus group discussions. The interpretation stage involved synthesizing key findings by aligning the themes with the research questions and objectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of the focus group insights within the broader study context. Finally, a detailed report was compiled, outlining the methodology, key findings, and interpretations, supported by illustrative quotes and visual representations like code frequency charts and thematic maps. This structured approach ensured a thorough and systematic analysis of the focus group data, leveraging Dedoose software to extract and present actionable insights.

Findings

The study aimed to examine communication challenges and evaluate communicative competencies among government officials in Kazakhstan, focusing on the factors that influence

interactions with the public. The findings reveal several critical issues related to ineffective communication within government agencies, highlighting systemic problems and the varying impact of stakeholders on communication practices.

Systemic Communication Issues

One of the primary challenges identified is the systemic nature of communication problems within government agencies. Experts and civil servants both noted significant issues in organizing communication effectively. Key problems include the lack of clearly defined communication competencies for different positions and the absence of a dedicated press service within many agencies. As articulated by a civil servant, *"There is no strong model of corporate governance. If there is a problem, we tend to ignore, from the standpoint that it does not concern us"* (Civil Servant-1, personal communication, February 2023). Similarly, an expert observed that *"Each individual communicates to the best of their abilities, leading to either ineffective or fragmented communication without uniformity"* (Expert-1, personal communication, February 2023). These systemic issues are exacerbated by the inconsistent communication agendas between central and local government levels, which creates obstacles to effective public information dissemination.

Table 2 provides a detailed examination of the factors influencing communication between the government and public sectors. The table differentiates between the characteristics that affect communication within each sector, highlighting significant aspects that impact effectiveness.

According to the result of the focus group, in the government sector, communication is primarily governed by legislation and political considerations. This often results in communication that is formal and less responsive to the needs of the public. Additionally, inconsistencies in communication arise due to the varied control mechanisms, inspections, and service provisions among different governmental bodies. These inconsistencies contribute to fragmented communication, as government entities may not always align in their messaging or approach. Government bodies are also constrained by limited autonomy, which can restrict their ability to address public issues flexibly and effectively. Furthermore, government communication is often influenced by political debates, which can overshadow direct engagement with citizens and further complicate communication efforts.

In contrast, the public sector involves a wide range of stakeholders with diverse principles, education levels, and focuses on issue resolution. This diversity adds complexity to

communication efforts, as messages need to be tailored to various groups within the public. Additionally, communication strategies must accommodate the differences between urban and rural social groups, which can impact how effectively government messages are received and understood.

Overall, Table 2 underscores the inherent differences between government and public sector communication, illustrating how these differences influence the effectiveness of communication strategies.

Table 2

Characteristics of subjects of communicative interaction

Stakeholders	Characteristics that affect communication
Government sector	Political communications governed by legislation
	Inconsistencies due to the government bodies' control, inspections and service provision
	The obligation to solve public issues with limited autonomy
	Politically attentive to unofficial debates
Public sector	Many stakeholders
	Unique principles, education, and issue-resolution focus
	The contact with a professional group during interaction with government
	Different urban and rural social groups

Source: Created by authors

Challenges in Communication Competencies

The study also demonstrated significant gaps in communication competencies among civil servants. Notably, there is a deficiency in skills such as effective public speaking, lack of clarity in messaging and emotional intelligence. Civil Servant-2 noted, *"At each government agency, the press service should be responsible for the information field, yet each civil servant is responsible for his actions"* (personal communication, February 2023), emphasizing the fragmented responsibility for communication. Furthermore, the lack of emotional intelligence and empathy was frequently highlighted as a major drawback. As Expert-2 pointed out*, "In terms of nonverbal communication, people don't even look at you because your presence distracts them"* (personal communication, February 2023). This deficiency in emotional engagement affects the overall

quality of interactions with the public, resulting in vague responses and a lack of genuine understanding.

Table 3

The challenges of ineffective communication

Organizing the communication	Skills and Competencies, Inner qualities
1. Non-delineation of communication competencies by position/category of civil servant or level of governmental bodies	The lack of specialists with competent writing skills
2. Lack of an agenda for communication	The lack of specialists with knowledge of spoken languages
3. Absence of an institution of press service	Insufficient attention to the development of civil servants' competencies
4. The lack of communication between government bodies	Non-use of quality criteria for civil service selection
5. Non-maintenance of traditional communication channels	The lack of public speaking skills and confidence
6. The use of personal social media accounts for personal brand promotion	The lack of core moral values among civil workers
7. Different agendas for communication by civil servants at central and local government levels	Inability to use new media platforms to build communication
8. Application of punitive measures as a result of ineffective communication	Absence of a human-centered approach
9. Exclusion of public communication in the performance assessment of civil servants	The use of formal language and terminology

Source: Created by authors

Table 3 highlights the key challenges associated with ineffective communication within government agencies, focusing on both organizational and individual aspects.

Organizationally, the absence of clearly defined communication roles for different positions leads to confusion and inefficiency in delivering messages. Without a structured communication agenda and dedicated press services, government communication often becomes fragmented and uncoordinated. The lack of coordination between various government bodies, combined with the failure to maintain traditional communication channels, further exacerbates these issues. Additionally, the use of punitive measures for communication failures and the exclusion of communication effectiveness from performance assessments create an environment that may discourage improvement and innovation.

On an individual level, deficiencies in writing and language skills undermine the clarity and impact of government communication. Inadequate public speaking skills and a lack of emotional intelligence further advances ineffective engagement with the public. These issues result in vague responses and unclear communication from government representatives. The absence of core values and a human-centered approach among civil servants also deteriorates the quality of interactions with the public.

As we see, the finding reveals both systemic and individual deficiencies that contribute to ineffective communication within government agencies. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive structural reforms and targeted training to enhance both organizational practices and individual competencies.

Impact of Communication Practices

The impact of current communication practices was evident in several areas. The study confirmed that ineffective communication often leads to public dissatisfaction and a lack of trust in government entities. Civil Servant-3 described the issue: *"There are differences between central and local executive authorities, this depends on the level of development, as well as the frequency of work with citizens"* (personal communication, February 2023). Moreover, the inadequate integration of communication channels and the misuse of personal social media accounts for official purposes further hinder effective public engagement. As noted by Civil Servant-4, "*The excessive use of social networks by 300% will lead to the contamination of state policy with information noise"* (personal communication, February 2023).

Additionally, communication issues arise during public officials' turnover. To ensure continuity, all accumulated information and communication links should be transferred to the new team. However, in many cases, the incorrect handover results in the breakdown of existing relationships with the public. Government officials' use of individual profiles on social media platforms to enhance their personal image exacerbates this issue. Expert-3 emphasized the need for continuity: *"For example, if a public official manages a personal account, it should not be associated with her personal identity but rather with her position. Continuity must be maintained"* (personal communication, February 2023).

Participants also expressed concerns about the policy of silence employed by some government officials, which shields them from potential negative consequences but leaves the public

uninformed. Civil Servant-1 noted, "*We are unable to demonstrate our work. We perceive journalists not as colleagues but as enemies, and we fear them*" (personal communication, February 2023). This policy of silence contributes to a lack of transparency and public engagement.

The study also highlighted the disparity in resources allocated to different government levels. The central government agencies have a sufficient budget to engage media experts and provide employee training, whereas local authorities struggle with inadequate financial resources. Expert-4 pointed out, "*In order to ensure clarity, the Agency (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Civil Service Affairs) trains individuals in copywriting and engages journalists to create headlines that are easily understood by the general population without the use of technical jargon"* (personal communication, February 2023).

Reasons for Ineffective Communication

Figure 1 presents the participants' responses, expressed as a percentage, on how the lack of communication competencies among civil servants hinders effective communication:

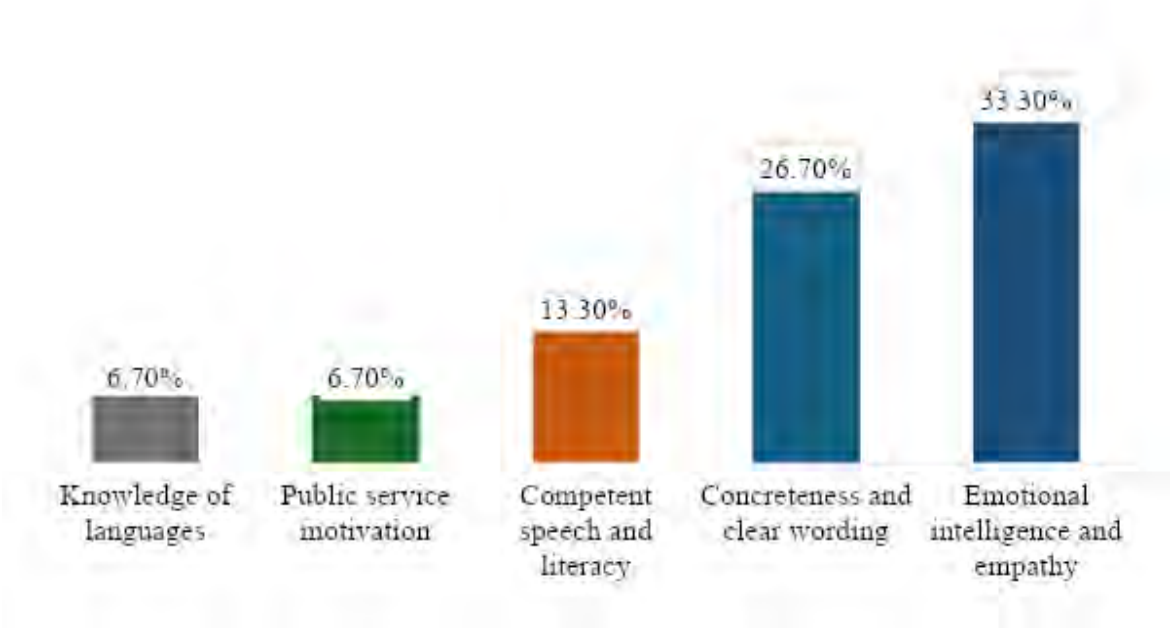

Figure 1. Reasons for Ineffective Communication

The value of public administration's professional activities is best depicted through the communicative competencies of civil service employees. Most civil servant participants have a

general understanding of what constitutes the communication competencies of a civil servant. As Civil Servant-6 noted, "*The ability to build relationships with other parties and people"* (personal communication, February 2023), and Civil Servant-7 added, "*To communicate the current government policy to the general public in a manner that is both comprehensible and effective"* (personal communication, February 2023).

The discussion led to the classification of communicative competencies into the following groups:

1. Competent speech and literacy;
2. Ability to clearly and concisely deliver messages;
3. Emotional intelligence and empathy;
4. Public service motivation;
5. Knowledge of languages.

Participants frequently highlighted concerns about the lack of emotional intelligence and empathy among civil servants in their interactions with citizens. One expert noted, "*In terms of nonverbal communication, people don't even look at you because your presence distracts them"* (expert-2, personal communication, February 2023). Another expert pointed out, "*First, there is a notable absence of empathy, which may be influenced by external challenges. The environment significantly impacts this lack of empathy. Civil servants often make excuses, avoid clear decisions, and respond ambiguously when confronted with fear"* (expert-6, personal communication, February 2023).

Another major issue identified was the civil official's provision of vague answers which contributes to unclear communication. Experts stressed the need for government representatives to thoroughly understand the information they convey and to genuinely seek to be understood. One expert shared, *"Today, as an ordinary citizen, I experienced communication problems when making a formal request. Instead of a clear response, I received evasive written references to legal articles, and my follow-up questions were met with formalistic answers"* (expert-2, personal communication, February 2023). Another noted, *"The public often struggles with the information provided, possibly due to the complex terminology used by government agencies"* (expert-7, personal communication, February 2023).

Speech proficiency and literacy were also identified as moderate factors affecting public communication. Many civil servants reportedly lack strong public speaking skills or avoid media interactions, which can erode public trust. Experts highlighted issues like illiteracy and poor

oratory skills: *"One negative trend in written communication is illiteracy, including punctuation and spelling errors"* (expert-1, personal communication, February 2023), and "*We lack specialists who can write correctly; this is only available in central government agencies, so we provide guidelines to local staff"* (expert-1, personal communication, February 2023).

Language barriers, such as insufficient knowledge of the Kazakh language or the Russian language predominantly used by central agencies, also hinder effective communication. As one expert noted, "*In the regions, there is a language barrier, with the central government speaking in Russian and using a crude translation method*" (expert-1, personal communication, February 2023).

Interestingly, service motivation was mentioned by only one expert, possibly because it is not a widespread concept in Kazakhstan. The expert remarked, *"I am glad there are those who are willing to be sincere and serve. They are few for now, but if we promote public service motivation, there will be no need to teach nonverbal communication"* (expert-8, personal communication, February 2023). Nonetheless, participants agreed that the primary role of government officials is to serve the people and bridge the gap between authorities and the public through empathy.

Experts emphasized the need for effective crisis communication, including crisis avoidance, rapid response, and developing protocols for government agencies. One expert noted, "*During crises, it is crucial to choose words carefully and provide timely, clear responses. Increased ambiguity leads to public misinterpretations, so prompt response and accurate wording are essential"* (expert-8, personal communication, February 2023). They also discussed the potential for crises to deteriorate due to poor communication and stressed the importance of maintaining composure and following a set protocol during such times: "*Civil servants are ordinary people with stress and emotions. There should be an action plan, a common script, or at least recommendations for them to follow"* (expert-2, personal communication, February 2023) and "*We need to prepare emotionally; leaders should be trained"* (expert-4, personal communication, February 2023).

The finding underscores that addressing both systemic and individual communication deficiencies is essential for improving the effectiveness of government interactions with the public and rebuilding trust.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has demonstrated several critical communication challenges within government institutions in Kazakhstan, revealing how systemic and individual deficiencies impact

communication practices. The analysis highlights significant issues related to systemic communication failures, gaps in communication competencies, and reasons for ineffective communication, each contributing to overall inefficacy in government interactions with the public.

Systemic Communication Issues

A central finding of the study is the absence of standardized communication principles across government agencies. This lack of uniformity leads to confusion and inefficiency in public interactions, as inconsistent practices hinder effective communication. The delineation of responsibilities between various government levels and units remains ambiguous, resulting in overlaps and gaps in communication duties. Budget constraints exacerbate these issues, particularly at the local authority level, where financial limitations impede the recruitment of skilled communication professionals and the provision of adequate training (OECD, 2016; Urban, 2023).

The prevalence of a "silence" policy, where officials avoid communication to evade blame, further undermines transparency and public trust. This approach highlights the urgent need for strengthening protection measures for civil servants and integrating public communication effectiveness into performance assessments to promote accountability and transparency (Blijleven & van Hulst, 2021).

Challenges in Communication Competencies

The study also reveals significant gaps in the communication competencies of civil servants. Deficiencies in public speaking, clarity in messaging, and emotional intelligence were predominantly mentioned as leading factors of poor communication practices. Table 3 illustrates these challenges, including inadequate writing skills, lack of emotional intelligence, and poor public speaking abilities. These gaps contribute to vague responses and ineffective public engagement (Macnamara, 2016; Grube, 2014).

Effective communication requires civil servants to possess key competencies such as delivering clear and concise messages, demonstrating emotional intelligence, and handling media interactions proficiently. Training programs focusing on these areas are crucial for improving communication quality and public trust. Enhancing these skills should be a priority to address the fragmented and ineffective communication currently observed (Sauer, Truelove, Gerste, & Limaye, 2021).

Reasons for Ineffective Communication

The study identifies several reasons behind ineffective communication, as illustrated in Figure 2. Key factors include unclear communication roles, insufficient emotional intelligence, and a lack of public service motivation. These issues lead to ambiguous responses and hinder effective interactions with the public. Addressing these deficiencies involves developing clear communication strategies and providing targeted training to improve emotional intelligence and public speaking skills (Bokayev et al., 2023; Blijleven & Hulst, 2020).

Participants emphasized the need for civil servants to be proficient in both verbal and nonverbal communication, with a strong emphasis on empathy and clarity. The study also highlights the importance of overcoming language barriers and improving overall communication practices to prevent misunderstandings and enhance public engagement (Luoma-aho & Canel, 2020).

The findings confirm that addressing both systemic and individual communication challenges is essential for improving government communication practices and rebuilding public trust. Establishing standardized communication principles and clear role definitions within government agencies can help mitigate inefficiencies and inconsistencies. Implementing comprehensive training programs to develop communication competencies will enhance the quality of public interactions and support more effective engagement with the public (UK Government, 2021; CISA, 2019).

Overall, the study emphasizes the critical need for improved communication skills among civil servants in Kazakhstan, highlighting several key obstacles, such as bureaucratic language, lack of empathy, and inadequate crisis communication skills. These issues hinder the effective delivery of public services and erode public trust.

To address these challenges, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop common principles for communication in the civil service. Establishing standardized communication practices will enhance consistency and effectiveness in interactions with the public.
2. Outline clear responsibilities between units/levels (central and local), press services, and within individual positions. This clarity will prevent overlaps and gaps in communication duties.
3. Address budget constraints affecting local authorities involved in public communication. Allocate sufficient resources to improve communication capabilities.

4. Combat the prevalence of the “silence” policy. Encourage transparency and proactive communication to build public trust.
5. Strengthen protection measures for civil servants' rights and include public communication in performance assessments. This will promote accountability and encourage open communication.

Developing a cohesive communication strategy that aligns with Kazakhstan’s cultural and societal dynamics is crucial for overcoming existing barriers. Enhancing internal communications, defining clear roles and responsibilities, and fostering a culture of empathy and ethical principles will significantly improve public engagement and service efficiency.

The research provides a foundation for future efforts aimed at enhancing the communication skills of public servants. The ultimate goal is to bridge the gap between government officials and the public, ensuring that public involvement becomes more meaningful and effective.

By addressing these recommendations, the government can work towards creating a more open, accountable, and responsive public service.

This study has successfully emphasized the critical need for improved conversational skills among civil servants in Kazakhstan, a problem exacerbated by the deficiencies in organizing communication. The research has highlighted fundamental obstacles, including the use of bureaucratic language, a lack of empathy, and inadequate crisis communication skills. These obstacles impede the efficient delivery of public services and erode public trust. In order to overcome these challenges, it is imperative to build cohesive communication concepts that align with the distinctive cultural and societal dynamics of Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of internal communications inside government organizations, indicating that well-defined responsibilities and consistent actions can greatly enhance decision-making processes and service efficiency. To enhance their interaction with the public and create a government that is open, accountable, and inclusive, civil servants can enhance their communication training, promote a culture of empathy, and include ethical principles.

This research establishes a fundamental structure for future efforts focused on improving the communication skills of public servants. The ultimate goal is to close the divide between government officials and the general public, ensuring that public involvement becomes more significant and successful.

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