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# Politico-Administrative Culture and Public Service Reform in Post-Independence Kazakhstan

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**Abstract:** Classical organizational management literature draws clear parallels between organizational culture and climate and effective use of power and influence as key to successful policy implementation of reforms in public sector organizations. On the other hand, the public policy literature, in particular, policy transfer as a strand within policy studies, emphasizes the role of the national context, more specifically, 'facilitators' and 'constraints' of "politico-administrative culture" within the national context, as crucial to understanding processes of transfer, convergence, and diffusion of public policy. There is a plethora of studies by Western scholars of public management who have successfully utilized these theoretical underpinnings to study the effectiveness of public service reforms in mature policy environments such as the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, and others. However, the public policy and comparative public management literature only offers a limited number of case studies from developing, middle-/upper-middle countries, which rely on concepts of organizational management in addition to narratives on the impact of policy learning from global doctrines, such as Weberianism, New Public Management (NPM), and New Public Governance (NPG), and national politics, on the implementation of administrative reforms in those contexts. Kazakhstan, as a resource-affluent post-Soviet country and a bastion of modernization and 'open government' in Central Asia or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in the post-Soviet era is a case in point. Based on ethnographic research consisting of interviews with elite academics, civil servants, and think-tank activists, as well as reviews of OECD and government strategy reports in Astana, the findings point to a potential abatement of the impact of context constraints such as large power distance and collectivist behavior by context facilitators such as those surrounding the use of 'trilingualism' and public diplomacy towards reforms in Kazakhstan particularly in recent years.

**Keywords:** public service reform; organizational culture; power distance; trilingualism; Kazakhstan

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**Citation:** Karini, Artan. 2024. Politico-Administrative Culture and Public Service Reform in Post-Independence Kazakhstan. *Administrative Sciences* 14: 268. https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci14100268

Received: 20 May 2024
Revised: 23 June 2024
Accepted: 15 October 2024
Published: 21 October 2024

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## 1. Introduction

The nexus of 'political' and 'administrative' dimensions of 'organizational culture', often referred to as 'politico-administrative culture' in public management, has been highlighted, both in the organizational management and public policy literature, as key to organizational performance and learning in the private sector as well as to successful administrative reforms in developed and developing countries alike. However, while there is an abundance of scholarly resources on the importance of business processes, job motivation, and organizational politics in the management/HRM literature, particularly in Western, developed country contexts, 'politico-administrative culture' and its impact on both political and administrative reforms appears to occupy a limited space in the public policy literature (Benson and Jordan 2011; Pal 2012; Karini 2021). This is particularly true in the case of developing, non-Western countries, including those described as residing in 'post-Soviet' contexts, where the focus of research by both scholars of (comparative) public management and practitioners of global governance institutions such as the OECD has been on political dimensions of reform.

Therefore, motivated by this gap in the literature, that is the lack of attention on administrative or bureaucratic culture as key to public service reform in the research context, this paper considers both political and administrative reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, a resource-affluent and rising-world economy and an important regional actor. What makes Kazakhstan an even more interesting case to study is the fact that its political elite has recently declared its ambition to become one of the top 30 richest nations of the world and thus embarked on massive reforms in line with the standards of the OECD as the 'chosen' international organization it aspires to become a member of by 2050.

Relying on both the organizational management literature, which pinpoints dimensions of organizational culture as they apply to both organizational and national contexts, as well as the views found in the comparative public management literature, which focus on lesson-learning among Western and non-Western contexts, particularly when it comes to administrative reforms mostly based on global administrative doctrine such as Weberianism, NPM, and NPG, this paper has been written with a dual purpose in mind. As such, it first seeks to bridge both 'administrative' and 'political' variables of the 'national context' as defined in both strands of the literature, i.e., organizational management and public policy (Evans and Davies 1999; Common 2001; Pfeffer 2010; Jabbra and Dwivedi 2005), through a modest study of the role of administrative culture in public service reforms in a unique, 'developing' country such as post-Soviet Kazakhstan. Secondly, specifically drawing on context 'facilitators' and 'constraints' as informed by the policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Common 2001) and applied to the trajectory of reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, it attempts to interpret those facilitators and constraints of transfer that would perhaps help in understanding the success (or failure) of administrative reform in other developing, democratic, autocratic, or hybrid systems.

This paper begins with ontological analysis of organizational management theory and its application to both private and public sectors organizations. It then identifies classical conceptual frames such as the Hofstede (1980, 2011) dimensions of organizational culture as well as more recent frameworks, such as Dolowitz and Marsh (1996), as well as the epistemological approach in selecting certain elements from these frameworks and fusing them to fit the context of this study. This paper proceeds with a detailed account of grand, political, and administrative reforms in Kazakhstan over the last 30+ years, which leads up to the discussion of the findings, and the conclusion that follows, on the role of select dimensions of politico-administrative culture thought to have influenced the progress of such reforms in the context of Kazakhstan and perhaps beyond it.

## 2. Management and Policy Facets of Organizational and Administrative Culture

To fuse both of the elements of ontology that this work is preoccupied with, that is organizational and administrative studies on the one hand and public policy and management on the other, the purpose of this section is to delve into the intricacies of the concepts surrounding 'administrative culture' from a multiplicity of angles including organizational behavior human resource management, organizational politics, and other cognate areas of study. Secondly, the purpose here is to posit 'administrative culture' within the politico-administrative contours of the 'national context', which, based on the underpinning of the policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Common 1998; Evans 2004), represents the macro-level of policy diffusion, convergence, and learning processes complemented by lesson (or policy)-learning at micro- (i.e., projects, programs and various forms of technical assistance) and meso (i.e., learning and development, HRM activities and organizational and development intervention) levels (ibid).

### *2.1. Organizational Culture as a Management Construct*

Stemming from mainstream organizational behavior, which, unlike anthropology and philosophy whose focus is on identifying analyzing and interpreting 'cultural differences' at the ethnic or national level, 'organizational culture' considers 'culture' at the group, organizational, and occupational levels. It has been characterized as a "pattern of shared

basic assumptions that is learned [by an organization] as it solves the problems of internal integration and adaptation, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, taught to members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to [organizational] problems" (Schein 2010, p. 17). While sociological and psychological interpretations of organizational culture converge on the salience of 'shared assumptions' for 'organizational culture', management scholars have added 'surface manifestations' (symbols, mottos, language, etc.) and organizational values, such as integrity, client-orientation, transparency, etc., similar to those encountered in the strategic human resource management literature (Ulrich 1996; Guest 2011; Armstrong 2010), to the "mosaic" of organizational culture.

It is undeniable that the theoretical views may help our understanding of the ingredients of such a mosaic, otherwise likened to the 'DNA of an organization', and as such, they are essential to the ethical dimensions of leadership studies going beyond internal integration and external adaptation (Hofstede 2001; Martins and Martins 2002; Schein 2010). It is, however, important to emphasize that, rather than looking at HRM aspects of 'organizational culture' across sectors, this paper is based on a conscious research choice. Thus, it uses select 'ingredients' of organizational culture which public-sector organizations in a context such as the 'post-Soviet space', where Kazakhstan is located, might be susceptible to. In parallel, relying on the policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Common 1998; Evans 2017), these select 'ingredients' are interpreted in the light of the 'politico-administrative' context either as "facilitators" or "constraints" (or both) of policy transfer toward administrative reforms in the research study. I comment on such a research approach, i.e., fusing interpretations of organizational culture from management perspectives with the salience of 'national context' as highlighted in the policy transfer literature, toward the end of this section, preceding the discussion on the context of political and administration reforms in post-independence Kazakhstan.

Nonetheless, the concept of organizational culture has evolved significantly over time. Since the advent of scientific management, also known as Taylorism, in late 19th century challenged by the pioneering work by and E. Moyo and M. P. Follett in early 20th century, respectively, on the role of motivational aspects and group dynamics in organizational management, the scholarly assertions of authors as such Peters (1978) and Pettigrew (1979) as well as Deal and Kennedy (1982) have improved our understanding and perhaps laid the foundations of modern organizational culture and management. However, of the modern-day authors of organizational culture, the seminal work of G. Hofstede (1980) on dimensions of the organizational culture remains outstanding. In his nutshell, Hofstede categorized organizational culture into six dimensions including the following: (a) power distance; (b) collectivism vs. individualism; (c) goal orientation; (d) risk acceptance vs. aversion; (d) indulgence vs. restraint, and (e) masculinity vs. femininity (Hofstede 2011). Ever since, Hofstede's dimensions have gained traction and increasing importance in the management literature and found practical applications in HRM practices and OD interventions in private, public, and non-profit organizations across the globe.

### *2.2. Metamorphosis from 'Organizational' to 'Administrative' Culture*

Subsequently, management scholars added new attributes to Hofstede's dimensions of 'organizational culture' by highlighting the importance of organizational climate and its essential components such as leadership support, job challenge, employee morale, and trust (Jones and James 1979; Ryder and Southey 1990; Wallace et al. 1999). While all these scholarly views were primarily intended to contribute to the enhancement of management and, in particular, HRM practices in the corporate world mainly relying on lesson-learning from the experience of the organizational performance in Japan (ibid), it was not until the advent of globalization and administrative doctrines such as the NPM (New Public Management) in late '80 and early '90s that scholars started to realize that management interpretations of organizational culture were not sufficient. Organizational culture, therefore, morphed into the more comprehensive notion of 'administrative culture',

which became essential in understanding, firstly, the 'cultural differences' of corporate environments globally and then administrative challenges facing organizations not only in corporate settings but also across public and nonprofit sector organizational globally.

Thus, both management and policy scholars started to realize that while both bureaucratic structures and challenges in managing 'administrative culture' among public sector organizations across nations were similar, the approaches of doing government business varied significantly (Jabbra and Dwivedi 2005). Their understanding of such similarities and differences were based on the perceived impact of globalization and, in particular, the role of both multinational corporations and 'global governance' institutions. On the one hand, the influences of these multinational institutions and mechanisms they institutionalized narrowed down the differences in the operations of administrative systems. On the other hand, they pressured governments to comply with international regulations, thus contributing to a universal understanding and norms of administrative culture (ibid). However, while the views of management and policy scholars of how such 'administrative culture' manifests itself at the organizational and sectoral levels differ relatively significantly, their assertions converged on the role and importance of the 'national context' in understanding 'administrative culture'.

From one perspective, mainstream management scholars contributed to the debate their interpretations of 'organizational politics' and 'political behavior' as important dimensions of 'administrative culture' as ultimately positively correlated with effective management. Drawing on the definitions by classical authors of organizational management such as Pfeffer (1992) and DuBrin (2013), in which surrounding organizational politics are 'processes, actions, and behaviors through which potential power is (directly and indirectly) achieved and utilized', more recent critics of 'organizational politics' have asserted that organizations "should limit the effects of political behavior, otherwise they should have to manage their politics effectively through honest and clear communications to both their organizational members and broader audiences" (ibid). Most saliently, one interesting dimension of 'organizational politics' that all, classic and modern, management and policy scholars converge on is the presence of 'intentional enhancement of self-interest' of organizational leaders as a key characteristic of administrative cultures across organizations and cultural contexts (Sabatier 1999; Pfeffer 2010; Hochwarter 2012).

### *2.3. Administrative Culture' in the Public Management Literature*

From another perspective, (international and comparative) public management scholars have consistently built their arguments surrounding 'administrative culture' in public-sector organizations by employing the more specific notion of 'politico-administrative culture' in their analysis of administrative reform in developed and developing country contexts. In tandem with the assumptions of the management literature, one camp of scholars has laid the emphasis on the increasing importance of organizational politics and enhancement of leadership and public-sector HRM in the success of failure of public management reforms mainly in Western contexts (Evans 2017; Berman et al. 2021).

Similarly, in parallel with the aforementioned arguments of the management literature on the role of globalization on administrative culture, another camp of comparative public management scholars (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Common 2001; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Pal 2012; Karini 2013) has argued for the importance of policy learning and international (aid) organizations, particularly in administrative reforms based on global administrative doctrines in developing, transitional, and emerging economies, including Kazakhstan, the case analyzed in this paper. In line with the earlier arguments of the management literature, both camps of the international and comparative public management literature converge on the salience of 'politico-administrative' culture of the national context as key in the success of administrative reforms globally.

Indeed, there is a consensus in the literature that the internationalization of public management is challenging precisely because of the highly contextual nature of transfer in relation to administrative reform including post-Soviet countries of CIS, Kazakhstan

included. This holds true especially in the case of developing countries, where it is difficult to find exemplars of successful transfer, which if simply emulated to other contexts, could lead to inappropriate transfer (Bennett 1992; Heald 1992). Moreover, as Common (1998, p. 71) argues, "a key problem in assessing the influence of international aid organizations is that their impact cannot be isolated from other variables that influence administrative reform". Most significantly, the receptiveness of the NPM (New Public Management), Weberian, or New Public Governance (NPG)-type reforms largely depends on governing elites' decisions and is shaped by contextual factors including the politico-administrative culture discussed extensively in this paper.

### 2.4. Politico-Administrative Culture and Policy Transfer

From a policy transfer methodology perspective, the Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) model further developed by Evans and Davies (1999) can be useful in that it offers an analysis of contextual facilitators and constraints to identify whether, how, and why transfer toward administrative reforms occurs in each context (Common 2001). Thus, they suggest the use of a multi-level approach to analyzing the context, including wider (macro) political pressures and (micro) elements of administrative culture (ibid). Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011) have also offered an influential account of administrative systems ranging from *Rechtsstaat* (where the state and administrative law prevail) to NWS (New Weberian State), which blends elements of the former with 'public interest' cultures, where public accountability is dominant. Some international and even local scholars of public management would agree that Kazakhstan, as several other nations of Central Asia, and indeed much of the Central and East European states broadly (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011), identifies with NWS.

However, the politico-administrative systems are highly contextual. For example, Painter and Peters (2010) argue that political culture is one of the key influential elements, in addition to societal and administrative cultures, in shaping public administration systems. Whereas, for Pollitt and Bouckaert, 'there is much more to administrative culture than just a bipolar scale running from Rechtsstaat to public interest states" (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011, p. 63). In their analysis, they discuss state structures, the nature of the executive, prevailing organizational culture, and relationships between politicians and top civil servants in various contexts (ibid, p. 73). In the context of the post-Soviet space, Stubbs (2005) also highlights the role of networks in multi-level governance and policy transfer. While it would be unrealistic to treat all the above as discrete research variables, the analysis of politico-administrative culture in the context of Kazakhstan will allow for the identification of potential variables which characterize its administration in the post-Soviet era.

Another key claim made in the comparative public policy and management literature is that one of the modern policy frameworks, policy diffusion and transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000) has been useful in mature policy environments in the 'developed' world but rather problematic when it comes to its application to middle-income countries (Sabatier 1999; Evans 2009). Specifically, this framework is an analytical tool which considers the role of national context in policy learning, through transfer and diffusion processes across contexts. However, when considering the 'national context', policy transfer research so far lacks a thorough understanding of the 'politico-administrative culture' and 'societal and cultural norms' of the national context. The relevant literature labels these as 'facilitators' and 'constraints' of policy learning particularly towards administrative reforms, otherwise referred to as reform enablers and inhibitors (Evans and Davies 1999).

### 2.5. Use of Theory and Research Approach

The discussion so far has sought to pave the way for the analysis of research findings *(4.0.)* through the identified variables based on the assumptions of classical management theory surrounding organizational culture, namely *the use of power distance and collectivism* vs. *individualism, as well as the role of language* in the context of Kazakhstan's post-Soviet administration. This is complemented by relying on the 'macro level' dimension of the multi-level approach suggested by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000), which recognizes the

salience of the administrative culture in the transfer process. While Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2004, 2011) distinction of *Rechtsstaat* vs. *New Weberian State* administrative regimes is helpful in explaining Kazakhstan's orientation towards the latter, the argument of this research is that, in contexts such as Kazakhstan, administrative culture should be not studied merely in terms of the organizational culture and structures (Schedler and Proeller 2007; Painter and Peters 2010; Stewart 2011) but rather from a broader perspective that incorporates political reforms into it.

Instead, building on the argument that 'the proof of policy transfer lies in its implementation' (Evans 2009), the attention is focused on the *politico-administrative* context as reflected in the outcome of administrative reforms in Kazakhstan, which is the overarching objective of this study. Therefore, the *facilitators and constraints* of such *politico-administrative culture* and how those affect policy learning toward the success of administrative reforms (James and Lodge 2003; Benson and Jordan 2011) are part of the discussion that follows. To reiterate, such a *politico-administrative culture* is interpreted through select elements of frameworks offered by the organizational management and policy transfer literature. This approach has been adopted in both designing research activities as well as analyzing the data from ten interviews, triangulated through a review of Government of Kazakhstan 'Strategies' as well as OECD reports, through a thematic analysis approach. Interviews were conducted in English and Russian/Kazakh languages and subsequently transcribed in English with the assistance of a local translator. The interview questions centered around subjects including organizational culture, communication strategies, and challenges of reform implementation in the Kazakh public administration. The interview data were then selectively identified and categorized into research themes, as informed by policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000) and organizational culture (Hofstede 2011) frameworks, specifically the role of collectivism, power distance, and language as either facilitators or constraints (or both) of administrative reforms in the Kazakh context.

I extend my gratitude to all interviewees, including bureaucrats, policy researchers, independent consultants, 'civil society' activists, and academics in Astana, who participated in this research from May to August 2023. Based on a research choice, which sought to balance sanitized perspectives from academics and researchers with those of practitioners, other criteria that applied to the data collection strategy and participant selection included diversity of positions, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds of interviewees. I am especially thankful to colleagues from the Department of Public Administration, Executive Office of the President of Kazakhstan, and academics from Astana-based local universities including Nazarbayev University and Kazguu University, as well as colleagues from Astana Civil Service Hub. It is worth noting that all research participants provided their consent to their confidential participation in this research study. As per the explicit request of the interviewees and in accordance with rules on conducting ethical research, their statements have been anonymized in quotations throughout the *Discussion of Finding* (Sections 4.1–4.3).

## 3. Background to Administrative Reforms in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan

Drawing on some of the assumptions of the comparative and public management literature, which has questioned the track record for the Westernization of administrative reforms in 'developing' countries, particularly those in the middle-income "Second World" category, whether aligned with Western or Soviet governance systems (Drechsler 2013; Karini 2021), the purpose of this section is twofold. First, it seeks to take the reader through the modern history of administrative reforms in Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country with a population of over 20 million, bordering Russia (to the North), Kyrgyzstan (to the southeast), the People's Republic of China (to the east), Uzbekistan (to the south) and Turkmenistan (to the west), since its independence from Russia in 1991. Secondly, in light the above-discussed notions of organizational and politico-administrative culture, the intention is to bring to light the relevance (and potential impact) of these notions for the debatable progress of reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan, thus paving the way for a more

detailed interpretation of the findings of this research and the analysis that follows in the remaining part of this paper.

*Modernization, Open Government, and Professionalization of Civil Service Within Kazakhstan's Autocratic Political System*

The limited literature on public management reforms in Central Asia suggests that "the declared objective of post-Soviet administrative reforms in the region was to shift from authoritarian, command-and-control models of governance to meritocratic, transparent, and citizen-oriented administrative and participatory governance systems" (Baimenov and Janenova 2019, p. 107). While there have been varying levels of elite political commitment, financial resources, and elite ambitions to follow the recommendations of global governance institutions among countries in the region, there are several factors that these countries share and are thought to have negatively impacted the progress of their reforms (ibid). These include inherent Soviet-style features such as authoritarian regimes, a high level of bureaucracy, and, unsurprisingly, low levels of both trust in government and citizen participation in policymaking processes (Coombes and Verheijen 1997; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004; Khodachek and Timoshenko 2018).

Kazakhstan is no exception to other countries in the Central Asian region. During its post-independence era, administrative reforms have been driven by a combination of historical and contextual factors (Janenova and Knox 2017). These have included a strong political commitment to the modernization of the delivery of public services and the professionalization of the civil service, especially in the formative years of the post-independence era. While the country shares similar challenges in the progress of administrative reforms with other countries in Central Asia/Commonwealth of Independence States and the post-Soviet space, the arguable difference is the Kazakh political elite's ambitions for OECD membership as part of the country's *Strategy 2050* (ibid). As part of this national ambition, the First President's regime had laid the emphasis on the importance of meritocracy and professionalization in the public-sector HRM, hence the establishment of the flagship Bolashak program designed to train future Kazakh public servants through formal education programs in Western Europe and North America. Overall, this translated into a commitment to enhancing the performance of the civil service, which was seen as closely related to government modernization and accountability, to be discussed further below. More specifically, to this end, the Kazakh regime initially introduced important changes regarding the civil service laws including mandatory competitions for all civil service vacancies (Baimenov and Janenova 2019). Other measures included division of the civil servants into political appointees and administrative officials as well as the creation of the Civil Service Agency *'under the auspices of the First President of the Republic'* (ibid).

Looking at the post-independence history of the country, post-Soviet scholars of public administration have categorized reforms in Kazakhstan into four phases. Those have included the early '90s as chaotic but still heavily influenced by Soviet-style regulations and practices, then the late '90s and early 2000s, when the focus was on the legislative frameworks regulating a 'modern' Kazakh civil service, and the mid-2000s to 2015, characterized by a trend towards the modernization of public services (Amagoh 2011; Oleinik et al. 2015; Knox 2019). During the last decade, professionalization of civil service appears to be the motto of political elites and bureaucrats despite claims that these reforms have not led to significant changes in the quality of governance (ibid).

From an organizational culture perspective, perhaps consistently with Weberian principles, the key characteristics of Kazakhstan's public administration system include a highly central role of the state, hierarchical relationships, and large power distance within the government (Oleinik et al. 2015; Baimenov and Janenova 2019). However, a key, positive characteristic and, arguably, an enabler of NPG-style efforts toward administrative reforms in Kazakhstan, particularly during the last decade—perhaps much like anti-corruption reforms implemented in Georgia or political reforms aimed at enabling and empowering civil society in Kyrgyzstan—appears to be a commitment to 'government accountability'.

Thus, the enforcement of such a concept initially consisted in the introduction of notions of an 'open government' and 'listening state' and were an essential ingredient of political manifestos over the last few years prior to and around the troubled events of January 2022, when civil unrest over energy costs erupted and was subsequently labelled by the political regime as a failed coup d'etat. The declared commitment to 'accountability' was reinforced by the implementation of a World Bank-style 'government effectiveness' framework, through mechanisms such as 'ethics boards', 'ethics commissioners', and 'public councils' (Janenova and Knox 2017; O'Connor et al. 2019). On the surface, these mechanisms represent attempts, on the part of the governing elite, to approximate a reform strategy to the standards and requirements of global governance institution, such as the OECD, which Kazakhstan seeks to become of a member of. While those interviewed for purposes of this research study claim that these mechanisms might be little known to the public, they appear to have been institutionalized, perhaps paradoxically, alongside the establishment of an astounding number of quasi-government agencies in recent years, which, from a conceptual perspective, is typical of NPM- rather than NPG-style regimes. The choice to 'mix and match' elements of the aforementioned doctrines constitutes the specificity of the Kazakh context, perhaps serving as an example of how emerging economies, in autocratic contexts, modify lesson-learning from the global public management literature to suit specific political goals, such as international recognition.

The views of the above-referenced public management literature also challenge the official narrative of an 'open government' orientation of reforms. They point to a significant gap between clear traces of the above-discussed 'Soviet legacy' in the early to mid-1990s to modernization efforts through e-government in the mid/late 2000s to a more recent push for outcome-based accountability mechanisms over the last decade as asynchronous with the pace of socio-economic reforms in the country and, as such, unconvincing of a real government commitment to 'accountability'. A more careful analysis of such reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan can perhaps be interpreted as a clear manifestation of the OECD membership as a political ambition. In line with arguments in the policy transfer literature discussed earlier, this might as well be interpreted as 'isomorphic mimicry' on the part of the governing elite which is common in other developing country contexts (Common 1998; Evans 2009). Another example of this is the OECD 'quality of life frame', which has been described as disconnected from citizen-centered government performance and perhaps even premature for Kazakhstan (Janenova and Knox 2017).

There are controversies around the effectiveness of the 'listening state' mantra embraced by the governing elite and ingrained in recent political manifestos following the introduction of a vast number of legal packages (also known as amendments). These have included new laws *"On the procedure for organizing and holding peaceful assemblies"*, *"On introducing amendments to the Constitutional Law"*, *"On Elections in the Republic"* and *"On introducing amendments and additions to the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Political Parties"* as far back as 2020. The Kazakh elites proclaim that their implementation is vital for realizing the concept of a "state that listens" and increasing the role of civil society (ibid). However, it is paradoxical that there are no specific provisions regarding an enabling space of civil society organizations, citizens' access to information on government activities, and, in particular, officials' as well as politicians' disclosure of assets. Indeed, as all of these comprise the tenets of 'open government' (also known as 'Obama style' open government platform), this raises questions about these 'measures' being primarily implemented to serve the political ambition of the OECD membership. Moreover, relevant mechanisms such as 'public councils' and 'ethics boards", while delivering results on 'fiscal transparency' as another key ingredient of 'open government' and viewed as a well-conceived strategy for citizen engagement, have been criticized for potentially being subjected to political control (O'Connor et al. 2019).

Perhaps the most striking demonstration of a certain 'obsession' of the governing elites with outcome-based government performance mechanisms is an overemphasis on the development of numerous strategies. Namely, these include *Nurly Zhol (2014)*, the gov-

ernment's state and foreign investments strategy; *Nurly Zher (2016)* as a strategy aimed at housing and infrastructure; and the 'flagship' *Plan for the Nation (2015)* (Janenova and Knox 2017, p. 426). *The Third Modernization Strategy (2017)* and *Strategy 2050*, per se, are more directly related to the OECD membership as a major political goal, at least as articulated by the governing elite, and are essential to a national socio-economic development agenda.

If we consider the perspectives of the comparative public management and policy transfer literature (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Common 2001; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011) and the 'transfer continuum' ranging from voluntary to obligatory to coercive transfer that is associated with it (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Karini 2013; Evans 2017), then our analysis again points to the specificity of the behavior of the governing elite in Kazakhstan. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that such behavior in the post-independence Kazakhstan fits the typical characteristic of 'isomorphic mimicry' while international policy learning itself resembles an obligatory or even a symbolic process.

However, based on a review of both government and OECD reports, it appears that a key feature of the Kazakh context is its role in knowledge mobilization and, evidently, a commitment to 'regional policy learning' on administrative levels and public diplomacy on political levels. An example of this is Kazakhstan serving as the host of the *Astana Civil Service Hub*, a UNDP-backed South-South cooperation network of 25 participating countries designed to assist national/regional public-sector capacity building. This is achieved by drawing on expertise from European and North Atlantic countries and within CIS and the South Caucasus. The country also plays a similar role by engaging in broader policy networks such as the NISPAcee *(Network of Institutes and Schools of Public Administration in Central and Eastern Europe)*. From a broader political perspective and re-affirming its commitment to both public diplomacy and regional as well as global cooperation, efforts to serve as a hub of public diplomacy are reflected in Kazakhstan most recently serving as the host of the Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions in 2023 and the SCO[1] Public Diplomacy Forum in 2024.

## 4. Discussion of Findings

To iterate the discussion on the use of theory and the research approach (Section 2.5), this study's findings are interpreted through three sets of variables drawn from the organizational management literature, namely select dimensions of the Hofstede (2011) organizational culture framework (see Section 2.1). These are further explained through an analysis of facilitators and constraints of policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Evans 2009) towards administrative reform in the research context. It is hoped that the fusion of these elements from two well-recognized management frameworks best serves the original goal of this study, which is to investigate those 'politico-administrative' cultural dimensions that are most salient to the public administration in post-independence Kazakhstan rather than to the Kazakh socio-cultural context broadly.

### *4.1. Pros and Cons of Collectivism*

As a former Soviet republic, there is no doubt that Kazakhstan fits the characteristics of a collectivist society, which evidently reflects itself in its bureaucracy and public administration system broadly. This is consistent both with the characterization of 'collectivist' cultures in the organizational management literature as well as principles surrounding the importance of the maintenance of the social order as emphasized in non-Western administrative doctrines such as the Confucian public administration (Drechsler 2013; Karini 2021). Individuals in these regimes "are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families which continue protecting them, opinions and votes are pre-determined by in-groups (and)... transgression of norms leads to feeling of shame and social harmony is always maintained" (Hofstede 2011, p. 11).

The accounts of those interviewed for this research point out that while a 'collectivist culture' among bureaucrats (and indeed society at large) is a manifestation of a national value system, it is often used as a proxy to justify the prevalence of persistent wicked

problems in the Kazakh public administration, including rent-seeking, nepotism, and cronyism. This is consistent with the interpretations of both global and regional scholars of public management, who assert that bureaucrats are often manipulated by politicians and business elites, as a 'cultural strategy' of obtaining rents from the population at large or the business community in particular (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Janenova and Knox 2017; Baimenov and Janenova 2019). However, the interpretation of this paper differs in that the collectivist mentality may as well be a context advantage. This observation holds true for the context of reforms in Kazakhstan, particularly when it comes to addressing pressing issues such as exposure of unethical behavior among politicians and bureaucrats by communities. These communities seem to be caught between a collectivist, Soviet-style support to the country's top political elites but deep distrust in bureaucrats, as opined by a senior academic interviewed for this study:

> "While reforms started as a goodwill initiative of the first President, albeit with only about 300 Bolashak scholars sent abroad specifically to support public administration reform and to address the shortage of trained public servants in the post-Soviet era. . . [the impact of reforms] has somehow been diminished by corruption. . . this endemic disease, not only at central but also regional levels. . . whereby political appointees, with the mentality of serving the top leadership rather than the state bureaucracy which includes the Bolashak alumni continued to prevail throughout the 2000s and beyond. . . often widely denounced, through social media, by communities across the country."

While it is widely recognized that, much like the rest of the Central Asia/CIS, perhaps except for Kyrgyzstan, the civil society sector in Kazakhstan is relatively weak and dependent on the state and its political agency for both legitimacy and funding support, such weakness is not necessarily consistent with perceptions of a strong collectivist nature of its society. Indeed, as several interviewees opined, familial and social kinships, a strong sense of community, and an orientation towards 'social justice', some of which being reminiscent of the Kazakh mentality through history, including the Soviet era, might as well be interpreted as features of modern social capital in the Kazakh context. This claim might perhaps provide a scope for further research into potential approaches of turning such a social capital into a politico-administrative culture conducive to successful reforms and better state governance.

However, while the above-described features of the national cultural context have been arguably helpful in building a culture of 'bureaucratic trust' among civil servants themselves, the phenomenon of *'team movements'* in the Kazakh public administration as a political strategy to ensure sustainability of reforms being a case in point, they have not translated into building trust in bureaucrats by Kazakh citizens. Coupled with the insufficiency of the state mechanisms such as the *Young Leaders Program* as a political strategy to re-build trust in the bureaucracy of the future, the current 'politico-administrative' culture in Kazakhstan may be described both as a remnant of its Soviet past and an antidote to the "positive" aspects of collectivism that characterize its society. Thus, while the collective sensitivities of the Kazakh society towards the quality of bureaucracy might be presented as context facilitator and enabler of reforms in the future, the persistent distrust in the Kazakh bureaucracy is a 'politico-administrative culture' constraint and likely to inhibit the success of reforms in the foreseeable future.

### *4.2. Power Distance as a Political and Bureaucratic Mindset*

In line with the arguments of the management literature, power distance figures as an essential ingredient, along with other equally important variables such as organizational politics, ethical leadership, and the like, in organizational performance and effectiveness (Wallace et al. 1999; Pfeffer 2010). Therefore, relying on Hofstede's framework of organizational culture, whereby "large power distance is typically associated with autocratic governments based on co-optation of elites. . . with power being a basic fact of society and its legitimacy often irrelevant" (Hofstede 2011, p. 9), the discussion of power dis-

tance dynamics in the context of administrative reforms in Kazakhstan is considered both purposeful and relevant. The analysis also benefits from arguments surrounding motivations of political elites and bureaucrats in the implementation of administrative reforms as discussed in the public policy literature (Sabatier 1999; Evans 2017).

It is not surprising that, given its legacy from the Soviet era, the bureaucratic regime in post-independent Kazakhstan as a Central Asian/CIS country is depicted in the literature as 'large power distance' and "characterized by absolute subordination of government officials to their superiors" (Baimenov and Janenova 2019, p. 112). This is consistent with assertions of both Western public management scholars and local researchers, who suggest that large power distance in the context of reforms in Kazakhstan can also be explained by the conscious choice made by the political elites of the post-independence era to align reforms with Weberianism (or more precisely New Weberianism) as a global administrative doctrine (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Oleinik et al. 2015). The bureaucratic superiority mindset behind the choice of such a doctrine by the Kazakh political elites is often at odds with public perceptions of "bureaucracy", as echoed by a senior government agency director in their account below:

> "In the Soviet era, calling someone a bureaucrat was not a positive thing; calling them a "career bureaucrat" might even be considered as offensive, but if you refer to a German public employee as a 'bureaucrat", that is a complimentary attribute. . . this is what we need to change in the mentality of the Kazakh bureaucrats."

Evidently, a deepening power distance not only between elites and bureaucrats but also between the latter and the citizenry in the context of Kazakhstan may be ascribed as a *context constraint* at least as far its impact on administrative reforms is concerned. Consistent with the 'isomorphic mimicry' arguments discussed earlier (Section 3), the OECD membership goal itself, which figures as a reform enabler and a potential context facilitator, might paradoxically turn into a context constraint in the long run. As such, it is likely to exacerbate the contrast between motivations of top-level elites (and compliant bureaucrats or sub-elites) and a broad public service increasingly held accountable by the public for the debatable quality of governance reforms (Janenova and Knox 2017). In the perspective of the interviewees, a demonstration of the egregious effects of such large power distance in administrative reforms in Kazakhstan is a certain disconnect between OECD 'quality of life indicators' as a concern of elites and domestic government performance indicators. According to them, it is the meaningfulness of such indicators regarding the quality of life of average Kazakhstanis, not compliance with OECD standards per se, that should be of prime concern to Kazakh bureaucrats.

The dynamics of large power distance, inherited from the Soviet era and evident in the post-Soviet politico-administrative culture, which both the literature and the findings of this study converge on, are likely to further contribute to a certain autocratisation of society and public administration in Kazakhstan. To some of the interviewees, such persistently large power distance might be an inherent motivation of the more reform-resistant part of the elite and even some of the more Soviet-minded bureaucrats. Most problematically, this perhaps undermines investments in open government strategies that top elites have otherwise successfully undertaken in recent years and should be aptly credited with.

### *4.3. Trilingualism as a Context Facilitator and Constraint*

Consistent with the approach used so far in analyzing the data surrounding variables such as collectivism and power distance, respectively, in Sections 4.1 and 4.2., i.e., the management and public policy literature are again used to interpret a less obvious 'construct' in both strands of the literature: *language* and its application in organizational contexts. Referring to the original concepts of organizational culture (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2) whose 'surface manifestations' incorporate, among others, symbols, mottos, climate, legends, jokes, rituals, metaphors, and the like (Schein 2010; Pfeffer 2010), 'language' appears be more relevant to international management as a specific strand of the organizational management literature, where it is observed that language and its use occupy much of the debate on

cross-cultural communication and learning particularly in multinational corporations and international organizations (Guest 2001; Ko and Yang 2011).

However, the policy transfer literature as a strand of policy studies suggests that language is indeed another 'non-negligible' variable in addition to policy complexity, bureaucratic motivation, isomorphic mimicry, and power relations in the category of constraints/facilitators affecting policy transfer learning processes toward public management reforms (Sabatier 1999; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000). While some of those variables has been useful in the discussion of facilitators and constraints of the Kazakh politico-administrative contexts through this paper, the notion of language and its complexity is discussed below both as a potential context facilitator and constraint.

To date, the very limited literature on the specificity of Kazakhstan's politico-administrative culture—a gap that this study intends to fill—has pointed to certain, salient, and perhaps unique aspects of the Kazakh public management system, which have arguably contributed to the success story of a post-Soviet, multi-ethnic, Muslim-majority nation such as Kazakhstan at least in terms of its economic reforms. These include a public management system flexible enough to simultaneously benefit from Soviet, Confucian, and Anglo-Saxon models of governance as way to learn from global/Western best practice in governance reform (Karini 2021). On the other hand, Kazakhstan applies trilingualism (Kazakh, Russian, and English) in its public education system (Karini 2021). Trilingual education represents a conscious national strategy, supported by the post-independence top-level elite of the country, as a way to accommodate the multiethnic composition of the Kazakh society through the use of Kazakh as the state language, Russian as the language of interethnic communication, and English as the language of integration into the global economy (Karabassova 2020). Despite it being a genuine ambition of the Kazakh governing elite, trilingualism policies have been criticized as inadequate and inconsistent, which adds to challenges of insufficient teacher training, lack of an 'English environment', and incoherence of educational reforms (Sarmurzin et al. 2023).

However, while there is a growing body of the literature on the practices, opportunities, and challenges of the implementation of trilingualism as a national education strategy, the literature on the dynamics of trilingualism in public management is lagging far behind. Indeed, filling this gap is considered one of the most important contributions of this research study. Thus, a benign interpretation of the data suggests that, given that the ability and openness of a national context to absorb international lesson-learning as a demonstration of successful transfer, it may be argued that trilingualism is clearly a facilitator in Kazakhstan's politico-administrative context. Despite this, those interviewed for this study offered a different perspective alluding to changing dynamics when it comes to the use of trilingualism in the Kazakh public sector to maximize its impact on reforms at the national level and the need of the state to pay closer attention to dynamics around it. In the words of an academic leader and former senior Kazakh bureaucrat:

> "Our administration needs investments in 'Kazakh language' proficiency as, due to the former (harsh) policies of USSR to assimilate 'Kazakh' as an 'indigenous language', there are significant numbers of public servants, whose lack of skills in Kazakh as an official language might raise questions not only about such a necessary competency but also their commitment and even loyalty to both the bureaucracy and the country itself."

Despite trilingualism being the pride of the nation and often a motto of political manifestos aimed at presenting it as a national brand, and irrespective of perceived sensitivities around the ethnic composition of the Kazakh public administration (and in fact, its society), neither the public management literature nor government reports have taken on board any serious research on this dimension of state governance in Kazakhstan. However, considering insufficient state investments in it, a realistic interpretation of the above quote might point to trilingualism being somewhat of a 'sleeping giant' in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet public administration and in the context of this research, both a reform facilitator and constraint.

## 5. Conclusions

Relying on concepts of the mainstream organizational management and public policy literature and, in particular, policy transfer, which emphasizes the role of the national context, and more specifically 'facilitators' and 'constraints' of the national 'politico-administrative' context, this study has sought to analyze the latter regarding the implementation of administrative reforms in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. After declaring its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, this politically and economically important, resource-affluent country of Central Asia/CIS, which also includes Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, has embarked on significant administrative reforms ranging from early endeavors to establish laws surrounding the functioning of the public service, modernization strategies, and, more recently, professionalization of civil service.

Unlike other countries in the region, reforms in Kazakhstan have more recently been accompanied by a push for 'open government' and promotion of the concepts of a 'listening state'. Although there is a consensus in the literature that these post-Soviet reforms have benefitted from the Kazakh top-level elites' political will, critics have argued that most of the reforms are indeed a classical form of 'isomorphic mimicry' to further their political interest in the country's accession into the OECD. While, based on the assumptions of the policy transfer literature, this would place Kazakhstan among those developing country contexts which have engaged in obligatory (or even symbolic) transfer processes towards their reforms, the public management literature has hardly addressed the politico-administrative culture as an enabler or inhibitor of such reform. This is precisely the gap that this research study is motivated by and intends to fulfill.

The ethnographic research leading up to the writing of this paper has consisted in elite interviews with several academics, civil servants, and think-tank activists in Astana, the country's new capital, as well as reviews of OECD, government strategy reports, and publications of the Astana Civil Service Hub, a UNDP-backed initiative to support administrative reform in CIS and South Caucasus. The data obtained from research activities which took place from mid-2022 to late 2023 have been analyzed through a standard thematic analysis approach surrounding three key variables drawn from the above-discussed strands of the literature, namely collectivism, power distance, and language dimensions as part of a national 'politico-administrative' culture affecting the outcome of administrative reforms, while strict measures to ensure anonymity and confidentially of the accounts of the interviewees and difficulties in accessing data in Kazakh and Russian languages are recognized limitations that have ultimately been overcome through means of triangulation.

The findings point to collectivism as a typical characteristic of the Kazakh national culture as having a rather limited impact on its politico-administrative culture although its merit of contributing to civic awareness in recent years might as well be interpreted as a context facilitator. While a large power distance between the country's elite and bureaucrats is a clear constraint and likely to further contribute to the system's autocratisation, a less likely variable, trilingualism, is identified as a significant facilitator of the national context. This study cautions that, unless the state augments its support for enhanced Kazakh language proficiency across the public administration, its potential impact on future administrative reforms might be rather diminished in its scope and significance in the long run.

**Funding:** This research was funded by the Social Policy Grant (SPG), Nazarbayev University.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** No applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Due to privacy and ethical restrictions involving research participants, some data may be unavailable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

[1] Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

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