

A STUDY ON THE SOCIAL CAPITAL PARADOX IN KAZAKHSTAN: FROM EVERYDAY DISTRUST TO CRISIS MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT. *This paper examines the paradoxical nature of social capital structure in Kazakhstan, in which, despite low rates of generalized trust and minimal civil engagement in day-to-day activities, a high rate of informal co-operation is perceived during crisis periods. The aim of the study is to determine the factors that define the low level of social capital under normal conditions and to identify the mechanism of its activation during a crisis. A sequential mixed-method design is used, combining data from the World Values Survey (Kazakhstan, 2018, N = 1200), a national post-flood survey in 2024 (N = 8000), and an expert survey (N=54) in 2025. Quantitative results indicate consistently low levels of interpersonal trust and formal civic participation under normal conditions, whereas crises trigger a markedly higher level of collective mobilization, as evidenced by the 2024 flood response data. Qualitative data demonstrate that cultural norms of mutual aid serve as a key mechanism for crisis mobilization, while institutional mistrust and the weakness of formal structures hinder the development of sustainable civic participation under normal circumstances. The findings contribute to the discussion on crisis management, informal institutions, and the role of cultural norms in fostering collective resilience.*

KEYWORDS: *asar (traditional collective labour), kotel (rotating savings), Kazakhstan, civic participation, social capital, solidarity, institutional trust, interpersonal trust.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, similar to most other states, Kazakhstan has been facing an increasing series of crises with an immeasurable impact on the economic stability, social cohesion, and environmental security. Researchers begin to describe the following decade as a «polycrisis», which is a combination of disruptions that are interrelated and complementary (Lawrence et al., 2024). It is in this context that the issue of enhancing the resilience of society has become one of the priorities of the policy. The improvement of so-called social capital, including networks, norms, and trust, that enable the coordination and cooperation, is one of the avenues through which collective response to crisis can be improved (Putnam, 1994; Fukuyama, 2000). Social capital helps in reducing the impact of shocks as well as promoting adaptive governance by allowing people to be more effective in working together under the conditions of uncertainty. This study views social capital primarily as a set of networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation (Putnam, 1994).

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Nonetheless, existing research consistently documents low levels of social capital in Kazakhstan, especially in terms of interpersonal trust, civic participation, and voluntary participation. Simultaneously, recent events have shown a seeming contradiction, that in times of crisis, including the massive floods in 2024, citizens demonstrated a wide-scale informal coordination and support to one another. This contradiction suggests that social capital dynamics in Kazakhstan may be much more context-specific than the current literature has supposed.

This paper discusses this paradox by looking at the ways and reasons as to why social capital in Kazakhstan is constrained in normal life but intensifies during crisis conditions. In this respect, the research pursues two main aims: the first being to determine which factors lead to the low level of social capital in usual conditions, and the second is to discuss the mechanisms that trigger cohesion and collaboration during crisis times. Based on these aims, the research proposes two hypotheses (1) under normal conditions, generalized trust and formal civic participation as core dimensions of social capital in Kazakhstan remain low due to institutional mistrust and weakness of formal civic structures; and (2) in times of crisis latent social capital is activated through cultural norms of mutual assistance and informal networks, leading to a significant increase in collective action despite persistently low level of institutional trust.

Unlike existing studies that examine social capital in Kazakhstan either through institutional trust or cultural practices separately, this article is the first to empirically document the paradox of the coexistence of low everyday trust and high crisis mobilization based on nationally representative data. Using a sequential mixed-method that integrates quantitative and qualitative data, the study extends social capital theory to post-Soviet contexts, demonstrating that latent social capital can exist in conditions of institutional weakness and be activated through cultural mechanisms in crisis situations.

THE “SOCIAL CAPITAL” CONCEPT

The term “social capital” has emerged relatively recently in the lexicon of social science researchers. Pierre Bourdieu, in his article «Forms of capital» (1986), along with economic and cultural forms of capital, defined social capital. According to Bourdieu, social capital is a network of social connections and relations, which the individual can use to gain benefits and advantages. James Coleman (1988) considered social capital as a resource embedded in the structure of social relationships based on mutual obligations and expectations, shared norms of behavior, and the availability of information channels for transmitting important information.

In contrast to Bourdieu and Coleman, who discussed social capital through the prism of personal benefit, subsequent theorists developed the notion of that concept to collectively perceived resource. Robert Putnam (1994) defines social capital as those characteristics of social organization (networks, norms, and trust) that enhance coordination and cooperation in the common good. Putnam also presents an argument that the idea of social capital can be related to physical and human capital, but instead of investing in equipment or education, he has referred to social connections, making collective action more productive. Similarly, Fukuyama (2000) describes social capital as a collection of unwritten rules and values that can be used to ensure collaboration between people.

Although there is no universally agreed definition of social capital, all scholars agree that it is a multidimensional concept that takes both structural and cognitive aspects of social life. The literature focuses on the classifications according to the levels and components of social capital. Specifically, researchers identify the sources and forms of social capital in micro, meso, and macro dimensions (Membiela-Pollan & Pena-López, 2017).

At the micro level, social capital is individual characteristics and social relationships that determine the ability for co-operation and trust. They are personal traits, age, family set-up, socioeconomic status, education, job role, and even consumption patterns (Claridge, 2020). The meso level captures the institutional and community-based environments where social life is practiced, which include civil society organizations, schools, local infrastructures, ethnic and social diversity, and mobility and spatial planning (Bolibar, 2016). On the macro level, there are more institutional influences, such as the quality of governance, the level of generalized trust, and civic identity (Membiela-Pollan & Pena-López, 2017). This multilevel view can be used to better explain the interaction between personal behavior, community life, and institutional structures to create or limit social capital.

Irrespective of such conceptual and structural differences, the literature converges on several key components, which render collective action feasible and hold social cohesion. These factors are trust, reciprocity, social networks, and shared norms and values, which lead to collaboration in cross-communities. Trust is one of the initial elements of social capital in all these dimensions. As Rothstein (2000) argues, trust enables cooperation and sustained social engagement. It helps reinforce the ties that bind communities together and contributes to the stability and cohesion of the broader social system (Sandefur & Laumann, 2000).

There are two types of trust. First, generalized trust or trustworthiness, which is a characteristic of people associated with their honesty, cooperativeness, and compliance with norms (Ahn, 2002). And secondly, institutional trust, which depends on the transparency, efficiency, and fairness of the work of public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003).

When people trust each other and government institutions, they are more likely to band together to solve public problems such as security, health care, and education (Pierce et al., 2002). In countries with high trust, people are more involved in volunteering and environmental initiatives, for example, Sweden and Denmark (Sønderskov, 2008). However, if one level of trust is undermined, for example, due to government corruption, this reduces the overall level of collective action (Ahn, 2002). In summary, bonding is characterized by strong ties within a homogeneous group; bridging reflects horizontal connections between diverse social groups; and linking describes vertical relations between individuals and institutions with varying levels of power and resources.

A further key element of social capital is shared norms and values. Scholarly literature distinguishes various types of norms that exist within society and their influence on social capital. Social norms are often defined as the rules that govern the behavior of individuals in society (Coleman, 1990). Moral norms are based on shared values such as fairness, honesty, and reciprocity (Popper, 2013). Values, in turn, are fundamental beliefs

that shape behavior and social practices (Wallis et al., 2004). Consequently, values and norms are viewed as public goods, bringing positive externalities such as mutual trust, improved coordination of collective actions, and reduced transaction costs (den Butter & Mosch, 2004). Together, these elements – trust, norms, reciprocity, and networks form the core of social capital and enable cooperation within communities. Yet, social capital appears in different forms, depending on the type and strength of social relationships.

Despite some variations, most scholars agree that social capital takes three main forms: bonding, bridging, and linking (Panday et al., 2021; Sharifzadegan et al., 2016). Bonding social capital is based on trust and reciprocity within close networks, such as family and friends, and helps individuals come to everyday challenges by providing emotional and practical support (Putnam, 1994). Bridging social capital connects diverse social groups and is particularly important in communities, especially in developing countries, as it facilitates access to resources and services across overlapping networks (Nooteboom, 2007; Killerby & Wallis, 2002). Linking social capital involves relationships between individuals or groups, those in positions of institutional power enabling access to resources, influence, and decision-making through ties with government agencies or political institutions (Hackeret al., 2012).

Research shows that in times of crisis, it is bonding social capital that is activated first, enabling immediate mutual assistance within close networks, while bridging social capital determines the scale and sustainability of the collective response to emergencies (Aldrich, 2012). Overall, these contributions suggest that the social capital comprises a system of social ties, shared norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and collective action. Its core components – trust, commonly held values, and social networks promote social cohesion, enhance community resilience, and facilitate access to both material and non-material resources.

SOME EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Social capital promotes interaction and cooperation between people and enables effective collective action (Fafchamps, 2004). As Fukuyama (2000) stresses, social capital and civil society are closely related to each other because the civil society organizations also lead to the formation and replication of social norms and values. The robust civil society can also help balance the weak state institutions by offering additional infrastructure to help solve problems in society since people are involved.

Social capital should be discussed not in isolation but also in the context of state effectiveness. This is what can be characterized by scholars as the association of social capital, which is vertical relationships between citizens and authority structures. However, when built on the basis of trust and reciprocity, these ties contribute to the capacity of governance as state resources are added to local knowledge and civic participation (Szreter, 2004; Evans, 1996). Such complementary relationships prove to be especially instrumental in the context of a crisis, when both the centralized coordination and grassroots efforts are necessary.

A notable example is an earthquake in Nepal that struck the country in 2015, resulting in the deaths of over 8,000 individuals and the injuries of over 22,000 people (BBC, 2015). Panday (2021) presents the way every type of social capital was manifested

among Nepalese citizens. Neighborhood capital came up, whereby its people worked together to clean up the debris, rebuild houses, eat, and provide other basic commodities. The concept of bridging capital also manifested itself in the form of sharing resources among villages, like water distribution to the regions where its resources are limited. The connection of capital was made in active interaction with non-governmental organizations that supplied tents, medicines, and other help. The better the social network and external connections of the village, the more support it could get as compared to the weakly connected communities.

The same trend was witnessed in the 2022 eastern Ghana floods that hit many residential communities and government facilities and claimed the lives of around 2,000 (BBC, 2015). Abunyewah et al. (2023) cite that those with established social contacts were warned even earlier by a verbal message or messaging services, and therefore were able to prepare and evacuate. The community-based efforts were community building of protective dams and the organization of disaster response with the local non-governmental organizations. These measures were not only realized in response to urgent needs but also in reinforcement of the adaptive capacity and resilience of the communities.

Social capital in disaster preparedness has been additionally reported in Colca Valley, southern Peru, where seismic and volcanic activities occur because of Nazca Plate subduction (Zeballos-Velarde et al., 2023; Velarde, 2020). In this part of the world, societies employ communal decision-making and traditional systems of governance to administer the natural resources and disaster management. These practices of the ancestors have been part of the official mitigation measures by local non-governmental organizations and government agencies, thus contributing to community-based adaptation and resilience.

Quantitative research also confirms that trust is a key factor in transmitting the influence of social capital on community resilience in crisis situations (Liu et al., 2022). All in all, these instances indicate that social capital, though various forms exist, bonding, bridging, and linking, are important factors in ensuring cooperation, resource allocation, and community resilience during matters of crisis.

EXISTING RESEARCH OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN KAZAKHSTAN

Studies of social capital in Kazakhstan are limited, but the those that have been conducted reveal several significant dimensions. Some focus on the effects of social capital on local government and how it can influence the functioning of public councils. These articles focus on the mediating role of social capital in local governance, civic engagement, and community-wide problem-solving. Even though the public councils are supposed to be autonomous legally, most of the members rely on government grants, thus limiting their autonomy. Still, councils have solved such issues as environmental protection, transportation, corruption, and delivery of public services with the help of established standards of cooperation (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Knox & Janenova, 2018).

Other research highlights cultural practices as informal institutions, especially during times of crisis. Conventional institutions like “kotel” (rotating savings) and “asar” (collective labor) offer mutual aid, supplement social cohesion, and offset

the ineffective formal institutions, even in the event of financial or environmental crisis (Darmenova & Koo, 2021). These customs develop traditions of collectivism, mutuality, and citizenship in societies.

Moreover, Kazakhstan has a hybrid structure of social capital, which is relatively trusting of the central government, low generalized trust among citizens, low independent civic action, and instrumental use of social networks to ensure the stability of the regime instead of democratization (Niyazbekov, 2016; Abdikerova, 2017). Even mechanisms such as regional media or civic participation initiatives often operate under state influence, which restricts the development of a fully independent civic society. The post-Soviet context plays a key role in the formation of a hybrid structure. Research in post-Soviet states shows that the Soviet legacy systematically suppressed horizontal trust, fostering citizens' persistent dependence on states structures while simultaneously weakening independent civic institutions (Howard, 2003; Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Finally, newer norms of social capital are emerging among younger generations. Digital communities and online networks facilitate cooperation around shared interests or social causes, reflecting adaptation of social behavior to technological change (Karipbayev et al, 2014). This coexistence of traditional and modern forms of social capital illustrates the evolving nature of collective action and social cohesion in Kazakhstan.

In the broader Central Asian context, research also documents similar patterns: low institutional trust is combined with informal solidarity, especially in crisis situations. At the same time, civil society in the region remains structurally weak and dependent on the state, which limits the transformation of informal solidarity into sustainable practices (Saini, 2024).

Toktomushev (2023) also points to the problems of social capital in Central Asia that despite the efforts of the international community to develop civil society, the region retains one of the most restrictive environments for associative life.

However, existing research remains fragmented. Most studies focus either on specific element of social capital, its condition within individual regions, or its role in particular public institutions. As a result, Kazakhstan still lacks comprehensive, nationwide research that would generalize the overall state of social capital across the country and rely on systematically collected quantitative data.

METHODS

This paper uses a sequential mixed-method design, combining secondary quantitative data with primary qualitative evidence to investigate the paradox of social capital in Kazakhstan: its relative underdevelopment in ordinary situations and its fast development during periods of crisis. A key methodological issue is the challenge of studying social capital in Kazakhstan due to its multidimensional and context-related nature. Current national surveys record only certain aspects of trust, civic engagement, or mobilization based on crises, and no survey provides a comprehensive picture of both the formal and informal aspects of social capital. This is why a mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative indicators,

thereby addressing gaps in data availability and the uneven distribution of existing sources.

The research has a descriptive chronological style. The initial step is the secondary analysis of two massive national studies of the same size to determine the baseline levels of trust and civic engagement and tendencies in the mobilization triggered by crises. The next qualitative stage, which includes the online survey of experts and in-depth interviews, is used to explain how shifts in civic behavior can be explained by the mechanisms and what cultural, institutional, and behavioral forces may drive such changes.

In order to measure the generalized trust and civic participation, the research utilizes the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) carried out in Kazakhstan in 2018. The sample consists of 1,200 adults who were chosen by the multistage stratified sampling in all the regions and in the largest cities (Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent). Both face-to-face and interviews were carried out using the language people speak, and language representativeness was ensured by offering it in both Kazakh and Russian.

The report is based on twelve typical WVS measures of social capital. Generalized interpersonal trust is assessed with the help of item Q57, which is (Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted?). Civic behavior is measured in terms of Q94-105 on whether an individual is a member of a religious, professional, cultural, environmental, or political group. These indicators are equivalent to internationally accepted models of evaluating social capital (Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2001).

The second source is a nationwide survey of the Institute of Public Policy in the wake of the massive floods of April 2024 (BBC, 2024). The sample contains 8,000 people aged 18 and above who are selected based on regional and demographic quota sampling techniques. The key behavioral measure that is used in the current research is titled “Have you personally given any help to flood victims?” Such a variable is a reactive or crisis-based social capital, i.e., informal mobilization that takes place within the frameworks of non-institutionalized forms. The scale and distribution of the public engagement were evaluated with the use of descriptive statistics. Such results are contrasted with low-trust and low-civic participation scores obtained on the World Values Survey.

In order to make the data of the 2018 WVS and the 2024 flood survey comparative, demographic subgroups were harmonized, and robustness tests were done to consider variations in sampling methods and survey tools.

A quantitative study was conducted in February 2025 in the form of an online expert survey to validate the findings. The respondents were sampled using purposive and snowball sampling depending on their professional engagement in civic participation, community mobilization, crisis response, or study on trust and solidarity in Kazakhstan. The last sample consisted of 54 scholars in the fields of academic, non-governmental, governmental, and think tanks.

The questionnaire was divided into closed-ended and open-ended questions that focused on the reasons to help others, the importance of cultural practices (e.g., *asar*), and the understanding of trust and solidarity in crisis situations. Qualitative content analysis with inductively generated thematic codes was used to conduct an analysis of responses.

To triangulate insights, three in-depth interviews were conducted in March 2025 with researchers specializing in trust, collective action, and cultural practices. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide covering cultural foundations of mutual aid, historical memory, and the role of informal networks under weak institutional conditions.

Thematic analysis was carried out through open coding, followed by the consolidation of codes into broader categories such as institutional mistrust, cultural traditions, and crisis-driven mobilization. Attention was given to recurring motifs, internal consistency, and cross-case variation.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for academic research. All participants in the expert survey and in-depth interviews provided informed consent, and all personal data was anonymized during processing. The reliability of the qualitative data was ensured by triangulation of three sources – quantitative survey, an expert survey, and in-depth interviews, as well as inter-coder checking of the thematic analysis.

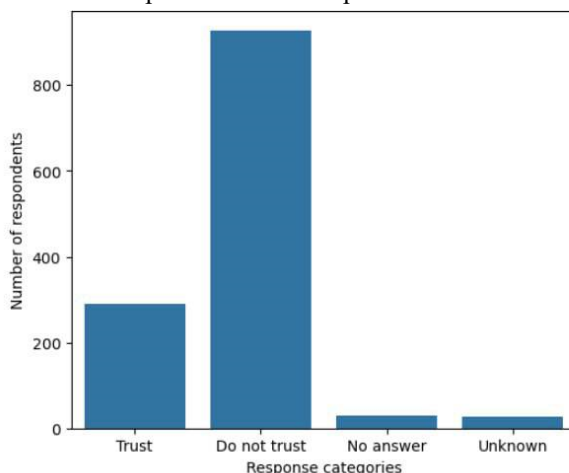
THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

The empirical findings of the study are presented, and an integrated analysis of social capital in Kazakhstan under normal conditions and during crisis situations is provided. The results combine quantitative evidence from the World Values Survey (2018) and the National Flood Survey (2024), as well as qualitative insights from an expert survey and in-depth interviews conducted in 2025. All quantitative datasets were processed and analyzed using the Python programming language, employing descriptive statistics and comparative techniques appropriate for the study's sequential mixed-methods design.

The first objective of the study, to identify the factors of low social capital under normal conditions, is examined through WVS data (figures 1-2), while the second objective, to examine the mechanisms of crisis mobilization, is analyzed based on 2024 flood data and expert survey (figures 3-6).

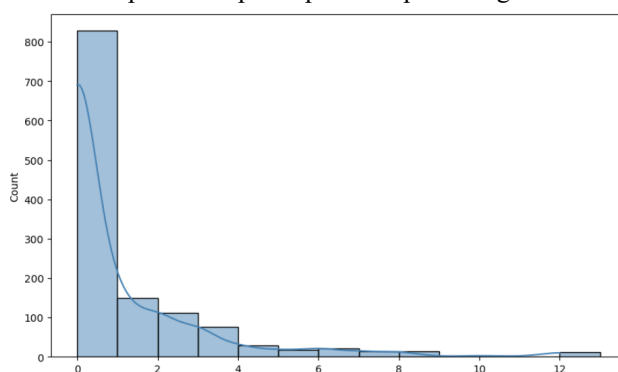
Quantitative Findings

Figure 1 indicates that only a few respondents have noted that most people can be trusted, although over 900 out of the 1200 respondents have noted that they do not trust anybody. The small percentages of no answer and unknown responses indicate that distrust is a stable social attitude and not a measurement error. These findings are strong support for the first hypothesis of this paper, which validates that the baseline level of interpersonal trust is low when there is no crisis. This indicator is significantly lower than the global average according to the same WVS wave, indicating not a temporary decline in trust, but a structurally entrenched deficit of social capital in Kazakhstani society.

Figure 1. Distribution of responses about interpersonal trust

Source: World Values Survey, Wave 7(Kazakhstan, 2018), N=1200

Figure 2 demonstrates the civic engagement in twelve categories of public organizations. It is highly skewed to the right: over 800 of the respondents said that they had never been in any organization, and only an extremely small number said that they were members of two or more associations. The participation reduces drastically following one or two memberships, which implies disjointed involvement and narrow use of formal civil society. These results, together with the low amount of interpersonal trust, also support the first hypothesis of this current study. This picture suggests that formal civil society in Kazakhstan remains a peripheral phenomenon for most citizens, rather than an integrated element of everyday life, which is consistent with previous research findings on the hybrid nature of social capital in the country.

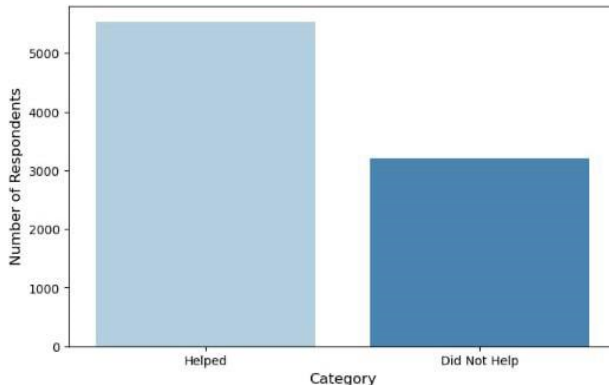
Figure 2. Distribution of responses on participation in public organizations (WVS 2018)

Source: World Values Survey, Wave 7(Kazakhstan, 2018), N=1200

Unlike weak everyday civic engagement, a survey carried out nationwide in 2024 on the floods in the country has shown significant growth of collective action in crisis situations. Figure 3 indicates that over 5,500 of the 8000 respondents assisted the victims of floods. Informal or direct aid was reported by about two-thirds of adults, an

abrupt break with the general trends among the data of the World Values Survey. This mobilization surge provides strong empirical support for the second hypothesis of this paper, which shows that social capital is markedly elevated in crisis conditions. The sevenfold gap between the level of everyday civic participation and the level of crisis mobilization cannot be explained by institutional factors; it indicates that the crisis acts as an independent activator of latent social capital that exists in Kazakhstani society in a latent form.

Figure 3. Distribution of civic involvement in flood relief in 2024



Source: Unpublished dataset from Institute for Public Policy, (Kazakhstan, 2024), N=8000

Qualitative Findings

Expert assessments made in 2025 reveal several key motivations underlying public involvement during crises (Figure 4). The most frequently cited driver is the influence of national traditions of mutual assistance (59,3%). Other prominent factors include a sense of solidarity and collective responsibility (51,9%), empathy and compassion (46,3%), direct volunteering experience (28,9%), and prior experience with crises (25,9%). These findings suggest that emergencies activate established cultural norms as well as emotional and experiential motivations, generating rapid and widespread collective action. It is noteworthy that material incentives and government initiatives were not mentioned among the key motivations, indicating that crisis mobilization in Kazakhstan is primarily cultural and moral, rather than institutional.

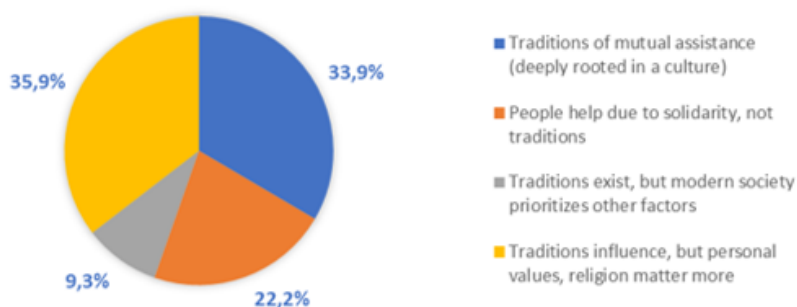
Figure 4. Motivations for helping in crises



Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

Building on these results, Figure 5 illustrates expert perceptions of the role of Kazakh traditions such as *asar* in shaping collective responses to crises. Approximately, one-third (33,3%) of experts indicated that traditional practices of mutual assistance are deeply embedded in Kazakhstani society and serve as a primary mechanism for mobilizing collective action during emergencies. An additional 35,9% emphasized that although traditions matter, personal values and religious beliefs now play an increasingly important role. Meanwhile, 22,2% believed that contemporary forms of solidarity operate independently from traditional norms. These findings reveal a diverse set of perspectives on how cultural practices influence crisis-driven social capital, suggesting a hybrid model in which historical norms coexist with evolving moral and civic frameworks. This diversity of experts' positions suggests that cultural foundations of crisis solidarity in Kazakhstan are transforming – traditional practices of mutual assistance are gradually being reinterpreted through the prism of modern values, without losing their mobilizing function.

Figure 5. Perceived role of Kazakh traditions in crisis response

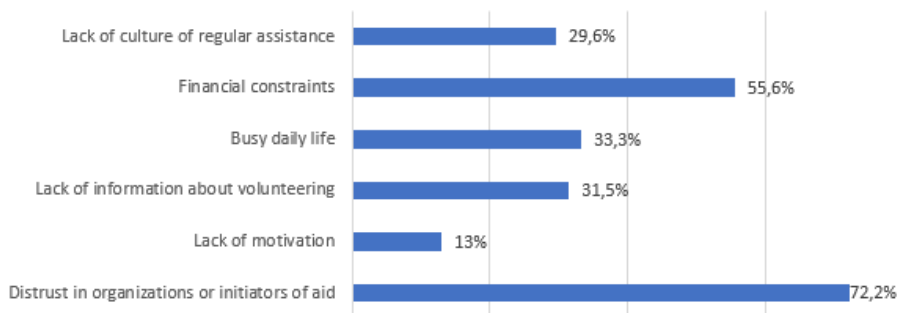


Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author, (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

The final qualitative graph (Figure 6) identifies barriers preventing participation in charitable and volunteer initiatives in everyday life. The most common barrier, reported by 72,2% of experts, is mistrust of organizations and initiators of aid. Additional barriers include financial limitations (55,6%), lack of time (33,3%), insufficient information about volunteering opportunities (31,5%), and the absence of a habitual culture of regular assistance (29,6%). These findings complement the quantitative results by demonstrating that low trust and limited engagement in public organizations impede the development of stable and institutionalized forms of social capital in non-crisis conditions.

The prevalence of institutional distrust as a key barrier confirms that the low level of civic participation in Kazakhstan is not due to a lack of willingness to help, but to the weakness of formal structures in which citizens could entrust their efforts, which is consistent with Rothstein and Stolle's (2008) institutional theory of trust.

It is also noteworthy that the root causes for the non-participation sometimes rely on the organizations themselves. If a specific NGO was proven to be inefficient or ineffective in past situations –daily or in specific crises—, that makes it more unattractive for people to be engaged in activities under their leadership or management.

Figure 6. Barriers to charitable and volunteer activities

Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research demonstrate a very specific paradox of the situation in the social capital of Kazakhstan: a low amount of generalized trust and formal civic engagement under normal circumstances is accompanied by a markedly high willingness to engage in mutual assistance in the case of an emergency. The term “paradox” is used here in an analytical sense, denoting a persistent contradiction between a low level of formal participation and high levels of informal mobilization – a contradiction captured by the quantitative data from WVS and flood survey and by the qualitative data from expert survey and interviews. In the expert survey, the mechanisms underlying this duality are enlightened, and it becomes easier to explain why the informal solidarity increases dramatically during crisis situations, despite the continuing low level of trust.

National traditions and cultural norms (59.3%), solidarity and collectivism (51.9%), and empathy and compassion (46.3%) were deemed by the experts as the most important motivational factors in crises, causing people to assist. These evaluations support the quantitative results of the 2024 flood survey, where almost two out of three people indicated that they had assisted in some way. The overlapping of quantitative and qualitative data suggests that quantitative and qualitative incentives, i.e., culture and ethical interests, instead of the formal civic infrastructure or organizational affiliation, are the essential antecedents of collective mobilization in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, scholars warned that traditional norms can be undermined in cities, diverge between generations, or that they can serve as a strategic tool of the political elite. Based on this, cultural explanation must be seen as important and not conclusive.

The connection between cultural norms and crisis conditions is further highlighted in the interview material. One of the researchers noted that the concepts of empathy and the culture of mutual assistance are also inseparable parts of the cultural code and are accentuated especially in crisis situations. Another specialist singled out two factors contributing to collective mobilization: a deeply rooted culture of collective help, which is the first stimulus to mobilization, and the role of historical or communal memory, which provides the opportunity to organize more quickly in the event of disasters. These experiences are aligned with the previous literature that highlights the importance of practices such as *asar* as an example of cognitive social capital, shared moral systems,

and collective interpretations to organize cooperation in nomadic communities in the past (Darmenova & Koo, 2021; Jia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, as Jia and others suggest, cognition social capital by itself does not often ensure coordinated or persistent collective action: where there are no supportive institutional settings, cooperation is likely to be spontaneous, unorganized, and short-lived. This dynamic aids in clarifying how effective community mobilization is only likely to be created during emergencies and not in normal civic life. The mahallas in Uzbekistan also represent institutionalized areas where social solidarity is exercised. In certain instances, they make avenues through which individual willingness to participate can be converted to involvement in community work which cut across individual interests (Dadabaev et al., 2017).

This asymmetry is caused in part by continuous distrust in charitable and civil society organizations. The professional evaluation of barriers to daily civic participation (Figure 6) showed that the most relevant challenge is mistrust in organizations and factors that activate help (72.2%), which is also similar to the results of the World Values Survey that revealed low respondent turnout in state organizations. Interview data provide further nuance. One of the interviewees cited the present-day mistrust to be due to the persistent psychological impacts of Soviet-era repression, saying that a totalitarian history all affects the extent of trust amongst individuals; people never ceased to anticipate that they could be deceived or outlawed. This is the conceptualization of Alexander (2004) of cultural trauma, which is the shared pain absorbed either in the social memory or in the silence of the people. Also, as in the case of Ukraine by Yurchuk (2012), it seems that horizontal trust and civic cohesion are weakened by the lack of a unified national experience of the historical trauma in Kazakhstan.

In other interviews, differences between formal reforms and practice were emphasized, where other interviewees noted that the concept of a listening state is good, but the mechanisms fail to work since the institution is mostly symbolic. Such an evaluation echoes the theory of ceremonial conformity noted by Meyer and Rowan (1977) wherein organizations assume participatory forms with the main purpose of gaining legitimacy, and not necessarily improving substantive performance. When this occurs, the citizen factors of influence by the public are often a mere form of a facade and as opposed to a genuine method of influence, thus contributing to the cynicism of the people.

Another aspect of mistrust deals with the views of uneven and discriminatory application of rules. As one of the experts noted, a lot of initiatives are put forward as part of legislation; however, there are situations when a person can evade responsibility. Such an observation is very much in line with the institutional theory of generalized trust as developed by Rothstein and Stolle (2008), which holds that trust is not only influenced by cultural leanings but also by the daily experiences of the citizens with institutional fairness and impartiality. It is the case that when the legal structures remain largely nominal and enforcement is seen to be arbitrary, the opportunity of people depending on personal networks as opposed to formal systems is more probable, and thus the continuation of disjointed ways of civic relationships.

These results taken collectively reflect a structural paradox of the social capital of Kazakhstan. On the one hand, there are powerful informal underpinnings of the cultural practices, interpersonal norms, and thick social networks that allow mobilization to be fast

in the event of an emergency. On the other hand, there are vulnerable formal institutions and deep mistrust that do not allow the informal strengths to transform into formal, institutionalized civic participation. This disequilibrium is the Kazakhstani paradox located in this paper. It will be important to enhance the formal aspect of social capital by establishing credible and participatory institutions to meet the normative expectations of the citizens, so as to be able to turn episodic solidarity into enduring civic capacity. The introduction of the elements of the informal culture into the democratic system with greater formality can prove a promising way for future research and policy making.

This paper has a number of weaknesses that must be considered when concluding. A significant limitation is related to the use of various sources of data that have different sample sizes and different methodological designs. The social capital indicators (trust and membership in the public organization) are calculated using the World Values Survey that took place in Kazakhstan in 2018 and included 1,200 participants representing the whole population. Through comparison, the results of the survey carried out by the Institute of Public Policy on flood-related assistance included data on the survey of a significantly larger sample of 8,000 respondents, and their findings have not been made publicly available.

It is important to acknowledge the conceptual limitations of this comparative analysis. In this article, interpersonal trust and organizational membership (WVS) are used as indicators of social capital under normal conditions, while informal assistance during the floods is used as an indicator of crisis mobilization. These indicators reflect different dimensions of social capital, cognitive and behavioral, and are not directly comparable. However, their joint consideration is justified by the sequential mix methods research design, which does not involve direct comparison but rather complements quantitative and qualitative data to identify contextual differences in the manifestation of social capital.

The collection of data, information, and time also makes it hard to directly compare the two. The World Values Survey is integrated into the standardized international research program, and the Institute for Public Policy survey was created to focus precisely on the measurement of interest in disaster response in a national setting. This methodological variation could affect the comparability of the results. Another issue is that the information on the World Values Survey was collected in 2018, and the survey that was conducted in connection with the floods represents the attitude of the population in 2024. The fact that the public opinion might change in many ways may influence the interpretation of the results, e.g., a possible rise in trust over the course of time. The research addresses the issue of whether similar questions on trust and participation are presented in further studies and, where feasible, to provide a longitudinal comparison to determine whether change has occurred. The next weakness is that the survey of experts is indirectly assessing the behavior and motivation of the citizens and not a direct account of the general population. Even though this methodology provides good analytical value, the expert interpretations can result in the element of subjectivity. Such information, however, can still be useful in determining the overall trends, especially when it comes to crisis scenarios. Lastly, the differences in sample size, scope, and question formulation limit the level of generalization of the findings to various aspects of social capital and

crisis-related aid. In future studies, the harmonized datasets using similar methodologies should be emphasized to create a more in-depth insight into these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the paradoxical structure of social capital in Kazakhstan – the coexistence of low everyday trust and high crisis mobilization is not a random phenomenon but a reflection of the country's broader cultural, historical, and institutional context. Based on a sequential mixed-method design of a combination of national survey data, expert evaluations, and in-depth interviews, the analysis showed that such duality is not an accident but a part of the larger cultural, historical, and institutional context of Kazakhstan.

The quantitative data proved continuously low rates of interpersonal trust and official civic participation in ordinary environments, whereas the qualitative data gave evidence that criteria of cultural traditions, interpersonal rules, and mutual moral expectations play a central role in the establishment of cooperation under crisis conditions. Practices like *asar* are reservoirs of cognitive social capital, through which communities can respond to emergencies by self-organizing. Nevertheless, those norms are still poorly institutionalized, generating collective action that is strong but sporadic and mostly limited to times of external threat.

At the same time, the research pointed to weaknesses to the formal institutions. The experts' opinion indicated that a lack of trust in charitable and civic organizations, unequal enforcement of rules, and the quality of participatory processes are among the obstacles to long-term civic participation. The historical legacies, such as the unresolved collective trauma and the deep-rooted distrust of the state apparatus, support these dynamics and still influence the perception regarding equity and the credibility of institutions.

Put collectively, the results indicate that there is a long-standing mismatch between strong informal bases of social capital and the weak institutional aspect of Kazakhstan. To overcome this imbalance, it will be necessary not only to increase the credibility and effectiveness of formal institutions but also to identify and mobilize culturally inbuilt norms of mutual assistance as a possibility of civic development. Further studies are needed to determine ways in which informal social practices can be incorporated into the institutional structure, and thus transform episodic solidarity into sustained civic capacity. In practical terms, the study's findings highlight the feasibility of integrating traditional mutual aid into formal crisis management mechanisms at the local government level, as well as the need to develop programs to enhance institutional trust through transparency and accountability of government structures to citizens.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

One of the authors (A.T.) is affiliated with the Institute for Public Policy, which provided the unpublished national flood survey dataset used in this study. Access to the data

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AT: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft; AAM: data curation, writing – review and editing.

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