Reforming while maintaining job security: a good idea? The case of the Kazakhstani public service

Assel Mussagulova\textsuperscript{a} and Zeger Van der Wal\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Singapore; \textsuperscript{b}National University of Singapore, Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT
Recent administrative reforms in highly ranked countries like the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and Sweden focus on legal normalization and the use of performance contracts, with public servants enjoying far less job security than one or two decades ago. Our study in Kazakhstan, a developing former Soviet republic subjected to various waves of personnel reform, demonstrates that job security is highly valued by public servants ($n = 627$). Moreover, as the primary reason for joining public service, it relates positively to public service motivation, and job satisfaction, and negatively to turnover intention. We discuss the risks of repealing job security for developing countries, which look to the advanced economies for public management solutions, and the adverse effects of transplanting reform strategies from the developed world to the developing world. We conclude with critical implications for policy and reform.

1. Introduction
New Public Management (NPM) is often vilified for the excessive emphasis on the importance of efficiency and performance, which, according to some scholars, has led to a disconnect between the prosocial nature of public service and the increasingly private sector-like ethos embraced by public organizations (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, and Johnson 2005). The emergence of the public service motivation (PSM) paradigm represents a countermovement. PSM postulates that public sector workers are guided by a selfless ethic in the pursuit of the public interest, which is deemed essential for delivering better services to citizens and putting public the interest first. PSM has been central to public management research in recent years since Perry’s (1996) seminal study.

Developing and developed countries alike continue their search for administrative reforms that reconcile the need to save the taxpayers’ money in the age of perma-
austerity. In doing so, they aim to capitalize the intrinsic passion for public service of public employees. New Zealand’s Better Public Services reforms is one such example. The new contract-based working arrangements for civil servants in the Netherlands, and the “normalization” of their legal employment status (Barentsen 2017) which eliminates traditional legal protection and job security is another example. Singapore has done away with extensive job protection for public servants that is hardly tied to job performance a long time ago. To a large extent, the same goes for Sweden.

While the long-term impact of these initiatives on national governance systems remains to be evaluated, the continued high public sector performance in these developed settings has drawn international interest (Van der Wal 2017a, 2017b). Many developing countries are prescribed to follow the same path (Kettl 2005; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). However, what proponents of such policy transfers often neglect is that developing countries face policy problems of a different nature and scale, and have distinctive institutional frameworks and associated challenges.

In this paper, we demonstrate that efficiency-driven reforms imported from developed countries, which engage PSM as the primary behavioral motivator while decreasing tenure and job protection, may not be effective in less developed contexts, and sometimes even contradict local demands. In the case of Kazakhstan, a rapidly developing Central Asian economy undergoing significant political transformation, job security is an important asset for public servants as pay cannot compete with the private sector. Pursuit of efficiency at the expense of job security, as is the case in the aforementioned developed nations with top-performing public sectors (Van der Wal 2017b), may significantly reduce the attractiveness of public service in Kazakhstan and narrow the pool of high-quality candidates. As such, we are interested to find out what the motivational spectrum of Kazakhstani public servants looks like, and how different types of motivators affect key employee attitudes.

Our research is guided by the following research question:

*What are the primary motivators for public servants in Kazakhstan, and how does the pursuit of external rewards affect employee attitudes?*

We make our case employing survey data on motivation from 627 public servants in Kazakhstan. We examine the main motivators of public service behavior, as well as how the pursuit of extrinsic rewards such as job security impacts PSM, job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Our quantitative and qualitative data analysis show that Kazakhstani public servants value external rewards. However, contrary to the oft-held view based on Western studies, a desire for job security relates positively to PSM and job satisfaction, and negatively to turnover intention. We conclude with implications for policy design and practice in developing contexts.

### 2. What motivates public servants?

Recognizing NPM’s shortcomings, public administration scholars and practitioners alike came to appreciate the role and impact of altruistic and prosocial motives of public servants in safeguarding the public interest (Perry 1996; Houston 2006; Steijn 2008). PSM research suggests that public servants have a propensity to be prosocial and behave altruistically (Perry and Wise 1990; Ritz, Brewer, and Neumann 2016).
Scholarly consensus postulates that PSM is a “particular form of altruism” (Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise 2010, 452) that leads to prosocial behavior (Esteve et al. 2016) or “actions intended to benefit others” (Brehm, Kassin, and Fein 2005, 353).

However, proliferating scholarship from non-Western contexts, and Asian countries in particular, suggests that in “natural, multi-incentive settings” (Perry 2014, 40), public service behavior is shaped by a complex interplay of motivating factors beyond PSM alone (Van der Wal 2015). This line of research consistently demonstrates the importance of external rewards, such as job security, commonly referred to as the “iron rice bowl” in East Asia, where a public service job is often perceived as a “job for life” (Ko and Han 2013), as well as that of prestige and social standing, and stable pay (Infeld et al. 2010; Liu and Tang 2011; Ko and Han 2013; Taylor and Beh 2013; Perry 2014; Liu, Tang, and Yang 2015).

In the traditional Western view, external rewards are not always looked upon favorably due to their alleged “crowding out” of, intrinsic motivation (Frey 1997; Frey and Jegen 2001). Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory (SDT) provides a clear theoretical link between external rewards and compromised intrinsic motivation. SDT posits that external controls imposed on individuals may lead to low levels of self-determination, diminishing positive attitudes and increasing incidence of passive behaviors (Vallerand and Blssonette 1992; Hayamizu 1997). Further, preoccupation with high pay may negatively affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment; provoke unethical behaviors, lead to lower altruism and a lower desire to be prosocial (Tang 2007; Tang et al. 2008; Van den Broeck et al. 2010; Liu and Tang 2011).

At the same time, a closer look at the two types of external rewards – pay and job security – may reveal that the negative reputation of job security is partly unwarranted. Unlike the pursuit of high pay, pursuit of job security may pertain to the satisfaction of a basic need, rather than the “want” that high pay represents. SDT posits that the need for security has a strong association with positive behavioral outcomes, such as enthusiasm, inspiration, and determination, which may potentially relate to PSM as a form of prosocial altruistic motivation (Perry 2014; Liu and Perry 2016). Yet another strand of research posits that external rewards may actually reinforce intrinsic motivation if they are directly aimed at enhancing perceived competence and autonomy and enforce other work-related goals (Gerhart and Fang 2015, 505; Hennessey and Amabile 2010).

Despite this important point of departure between the two types of external motivators – pay and job security – they are often treated as a single category and thus become a primary target for public sector reforms which view them as needing considerable improvement (pay-for-performance arrangements) or complete retrenchment, as is the case with the complete removal of tenure protection discussed in the next section.

3. Public sector reforms and job security

Reflective of the general outlook on PSM and external rewards, public sector reform agendas in many developed countries attempt to engage intrinsic motives of public servants while simultaneously dismantling arrangements perceived as lacking a performance-oriented approach (Battaglio and French 2016).
exacerbated by recent waves of austerity and budget cuts in lieu of the global financial crisis (Overmans 2019; Van der Voet 2019). Traditionally, developed countries are characterized by a long history of public service ethos. Permanent employment has long been the norm in the public sector in OECD countries, with much greater job security than the private sector (OECD 2004). However, this situation started to shift significantly since the 1990s. The move towards more temporary employment – and away from lifelong careers – appears to be driven mainly by the realities of the contemporary Labor market, and inspired by ‘running government like a business’ (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). The following four cases illustrate this trend of employment flexibilization (Bossaert 2005).

New Zealand introduced NPM-style fixed-term contracts for all civil service in the late 1980s (Hood 1998). The 1988 State Sector Act eliminated permanent tenure, introducing in its stead a system of fixed renewable contracts of up to five years (Gregory and Christensen 2004). Since then, civil servants have been accorded the same limited employment protection as private sector employees. Workforce reduction was drastic, with a focus on efficiency and accountability (New Zealand State Services Commission 1998). As a result of increased responsibilities, public employees are said to be more likely to report greater job stress than private sector employees, as well as experiencing an increase in unpaid work (Plimmer et al. 2013; Le Fevre, Boxall, and Macky 2015). In spite of these developments, public employees report feeling empowered, motivated and committed to serve the public (Plimmer et al. 2013). In addition, civil service pay is competitive, with average salaries in the public sector being higher than in the private sector (Chen, Bozeman, and Berman 2018), and New Zealand consistently ranking in the top 10 of any global ranking (Van der Wal 2017b).

After two decades of fierce debate, the government of the Netherlands announced in 2014 that the legal status of civil servants would be “normalized”: from 2020 onwards, all civil servants will have employment contracts, just like employees in the private sector, and will no longer be formally appointed to their positions (Barentsen, 2017). Civil servants will fall under private Labor law, including regulations regarding the termination of employment. As these developments are quite nascent, their results and impact on PSM of public servants remain to be seen.

The employment conditions of statutory civil servants in Sweden have been moving towards a standard alignment with the private sector. With the exception of very few positions, such as judges, all lifelong employment in the Swedish civil service has been replaced by employment on a permanent contract basis, placing government employees under the same legislation as other employees. As of 2003, more than 95% of government staff were employed under the permanent contract system (OECD 2005).

Singapore is also increasingly moving away from the culture of the “iron rice bowl”, a Chinese term for job stability, towards more flexibility in the civil service workforce. Over the years, ministries have found the contract framework useful to appoint new officers to assess their suitability for the job before making a decision on a permanent contract after two years. Such contract officers enjoy the same service benefits as permanent officers, but they can still be let go after three consecutive years of mediocre performance (see Quah 2010). Like New Zealand, and more so than the Netherlands and Sweden with their long held egalitarian and social democratic traditions, public
sector salaries in Singapore are directly pegged to the private sector and are among the highest public sector salaries in the world (Quah 2010).

Many global reform waves suggest a high degree of universalism applies to public services across the globe. However, how do we know whether the abovementioned personnel flexibilization reforms would also work in developing settings?

4. Public service in Kazakhstan

As a case for studying reform and motivation, Kazakhstan rarely features in the public administration and policy literature due to its relatively recent emergence as an independent nation, with some notable recent exceptions (De Vries and Sobis 2014; Janenova and Knox 2017; Mussagulova et al. 2019). Former Soviet Union nations are under-represented in studies on motivation and employee attitudes with only a few studies examining the organizational level of analysis (Liebert 2014; Rinnert 2015). The extent to which PSM drives behavior of public officials in Kazakhstan, therefore, remains ambiguous: we have yet to establish whether public servants in the former Soviet Union are prosocially inclined after decades of communism as the dominant ideology, followed by externally enforced administrative reforms.

Perry (2014, 40) suggests rather strongly that former Soviet states are best described as “non-incentive type” settings, with low job security, low pay, and low PSM, but this assumption has not been empirically validated in recent studies. Scant research on this topic yields intriguing results: a comparative study of values between East and West Germans two decades after reunification demonstrates that East Germans attach much more importance to income and occupational status when pursuing civil service employment than West Germans (van Hoorn and Maseland 2010).

Kazakhstan is a developing upper-middle-income Central Asian country that has seen rapid growth since it gained Soviet-independence in 1991, and has been subject to various externally enforced public management reforms. Kazakhstan is a classical developing governance setting characterized by pervasive corruption issues, path dependence, and continuous pressure for public sector reform (Andrews 2013; Van der Wal 2013). This is exactly what makes it a pertinent case for the topic of study.

In 1999, the law “On civil service” and 11 by-laws were passed as part of a reform trajectory to professionalize the civil service, including features with little to no precedent in the region: delineation of the political and administrative space; mandatory competitive recruitment; and a specialized nation-wide HR department (Janenova and Knox 2017). Recently, scholars have published critical accounts about the extent to which these reforms have been effectively implemented, pointing at the overload of subsequent reform initiatives rapidly succeeding each other in recent years (De Vries and Sobis 2014; Janenova and Knox 2017).

Job security, especially at the entry level, has long been an attractive feature of public service employment. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the private sector was too weak to offer job stability comparable to the public sector, despite the differences in pay; conditions comparable to other developing countries in Africa (Awortwi and Vondee 2007), Europe (Norris 2003), and other former Soviet nations (Randma 2001). Survey results from Estonia and Hungary, for example, show public servants prioritize
job security as one of the most attractive features of public service employment – 62% and 70% of respondents respectively, highly value job security (Sootla and Laane 2013; Vanyolos and Hajnal 2013).

Civil service jobs in Kazakhstan are generally very secure and civil service employment is regulated by a separate civil service law which differs from general labor market regulations (Republic of Kazakhstan Civil Service and Anti-Corruption Agency 2018). A recent report by OECD (2018) confirms this, by revealing that Kazakhstani public servants are satisfied with the level of job security, listing it as one of the key advantages of working for the government (OECD 2018, 81). Dismissals based on poor performance are rare, and unsatisfactory performance appraisals for 2 consecutive years usually lead to a maximum penalty of demotion (OECD 2018, 110). Pay, however, has been lagging behind and is not competitive enough to attract top talent, who turn to the private sector for opportunities (Emrich-Bakenova 2009; Bhuiyan and Amagoh 2011). Still, the turnover rate in the Kazakhstani public service remains relatively low at 6.2% in 2017 (Republic of Kazakhstan Civil Service and Anti-Corruption Agency 2018).

In an attempt to improve performance and streamline the salary arrangements, the Kazakhstani government set out to implement a performance-based pay scheme, in which salary increments are added based on results and outcomes: “the achievement of annual objectives for civil servants; achievement of strategic plans for state agencies; indicators of good quality of public services for ministers and Akims (governors), including standard of living and attracting investments; and positive macroeconomic indicators for government officials” (Government of Kazakhstan 2015). 2018 marked the introduction of a point-factor scale grading system for public service, where job content and the nature of tasks, as well as the personal work effort will largely determine the base salary. The system was rolled out in two central government agencies and two local governments, with the results of the implementation still pending as of 2019.

Performance-based pay arrangements are part-and-parcel of NPM-style reforms emphasizing performance and relying on organizational control, in this case, monetary instruments, to elicit performance (Frey, Homberg, and Osterloh 2013; Bellé and Ongaro 2014; Perry, Engbers, and Jun 2017). Several studies have pointed at the crowding-out effect of performance-based pay on PSM (Stazyk 2013; Bellé 2015; Chen 2018). This is increasingly recognized as more countries eschew performance-based pay in favor of traditional remuneration packages and other forms of motivation (Esteve and Schuster 2019). One of the most fervent supporters of performance-based pay, New Zealand, has moved away from the initiative having recognized its adverse impact on both performance and motivation; labeling it “counter-productive to achieving the collaborative team-based approach and collective leadership that is critical to achieving better outcomes for New Zealanders” (Hipkins 2018).

Kazakhstan in its reform efforts relies heavily on the experiences of “advanced societies”, or leaders of various national performance rankings, economically developed countries, which successfully implemented such management reforms. A scan of media coverage of Kazakhstani civil service reform initiatives is testament to this: countries like Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, UK, USA, and their “best practices” are
mentioned to reinforce the validity and efficacy of reforms (Agency for Civil Service Affairs 2018).

Kazakhstan prides itself on being one of the more innovative countries in the post-Soviet region when it comes to streamlining public service. It has been one of the first countries in the region to introduce the Senior Civil Service, a public service-wide competency framework, and a performance appraisal system (Baimenov and Janenova 2019; Baimenov and Liebert 2019). The context, however, is rarely discussed, if at all, rendering the relevance of these reforms in a transitional context somewhat ambiguous. The country’s consistently underwhelming performance in the anti-corruption rankings and numerous cases of bribery and graft, however, undermine the reform efforts and warrant questions about the need for solutions which fit the local context better than the imported novelties emphasizing form over function.

In sum, the complex and incentive-ambivalent context in which Kazakhstani public servants operate, may largely shape the motivating factors guiding their behaviors and is significantly less straightforward than revolving primarily around PSM. As per Perry’s (2014) assumption, we hypothesize that Kazakhstan is a mixed-incentive setting where the public servants may not always be prosocially motivated. We set out to identify what the primary motivators are, followed by an examination of their relationship with important employee attitudes such as PSM, job satisfaction and turnover intention.

If our assumption proves correct, the context in which external rewards are highly valued and co-exist with PSM may be unsuitable for the type of public sector reforms practiced in more developed contexts discussed earlier in this article. Overreliance on PSM as the main driver of public service behaviors in such a case may result in employee dissatisfaction and high turnover as public employees will turn to other sectors for more promising job opportunities and a better fit.

5. Data and empirical approach

We collected our data as part of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) project on motivation of public officials in developing countries through a survey of government employees from November 2016 to January 2017. The link to the questionnaire was distributed by the Agency for Civil Service Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the local governments (akimats) of Northern Kazakhstan, Southern Kazakhstan, Mangystau and Atyrau provinces, as well as the city governments of Astana and Almaty. The following central government agencies also took part in the survey: Ministry of Investment and Development, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of National Economy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Education and Science.

Collection of the data through government-affiliated channels posed a risk of social desirability bias, as public servants would have been more likely to provide responses deemed as socially adequate when the data collection was implemented by the central government. In order to mitigate the potential threats to data validity and reliability, several precautions were put in place. First, the survey was carried out online, eliminating the risks posed by a face-to-face interview, or paper-and-pen data collection. Second, the items were randomized to avoid the priming effect. Third, some items were reversed to address the acquiescence bias, and reduce the impact of positive
wording on respondents. Finally, the survey was completely anonymous, with a single link posted on intranet-portal of the Agency for Civil Service Affairs, which was then distributed to the respondents, rather than sending out personalized links by email. The public servants were provided with a short explanatory note about the anonymity of the survey and the use of data for research purposes only.

To test our theoretical assumption, we triangulate quantitative and qualitative data. The design of the survey questionnaire was partially informed by a focus group discussion with ten Kazakhstani public servants who shared their personal motivations for joining public service, as well as their views on the status quo of public service motivation in the government of Kazakhstan. Quantitative data was used to identify what motivates public servants in Kazakhstan, and whether they display a preference for pecuniary rewards, as well as how they perceive the current system of rewards and recognition in their respective agencies.

To this end, we include two open questions in our questionnaire: Which measure or reform would be most effective in Kazakhstan to increase the efforts of public officials to perform? and What is currently the biggest obstacle for enhancing the motivation of public officials in Kazakhstan? Coded qualitative responses to these items complement our survey data (cf. Van der Wal 2017c; Van der Wal and Yang 2015; Van Steden, Van der Wal, and Lasthuizen 2015).

For the quantitative part of our research we employed OLS regression for which we used pursuit of job security as the independent variable, and PSM, job satisfaction and turnover intention as the dependent variables. Following Perry’s (1996) measurement of PSM, we selected five items which were used in a 1996 Merit Systems Protection Board (MSPB) survey of federal employees in the United States, validated in later studies as being an equally good measure as the original 24-item scale (Wright, Christensen, and Pandey 2013). These items captured three PSM dimensions – commitment to public interest, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Recent studies have provided additional justification for the exclusion of attraction to policymaking by questioning the very validation of the original attraction to policymaking items (Perry 1996) given its emphasis on politics and politicians or ideology rather than policymaking (Kim 2009; Ritz 2011). Cronbach’s alpha for the five items chosen is 0.67. Despite the concern in the academic literature about the universality of PSM as a concept and its applicability across different contexts (Kim et al. 2013; Ritz et al. 2016; Wright et al. 2013), confirmatory factor analysis indicates a satisfactory fit of the four-factor model to our data.

For measuring job satisfaction, we used the scale by Bono and Judge (2003) which consists of three items. Cronbach’s alpha for the items chosen is 0.63. In order to identify the turnover intention of public servants we used the following item: “Given the opportunity, I would leave my current job to take a job in a different sector” from a study by Ko and Han (2013). All these are measured by an ordinal item, where 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. Our main independent variable is the pursuit of job security as the main reason for joining public service (“I joined public service for a stable, secure and promising future”), measured with an ordinal item where 1 = strongly disagree, and 5 = strongly agree.

We controlled for the following confounding variables: age, gender, education, public service experience, government level, supervision of employees, as previous studies
have shown they may affect employee motivation and the pursuit of external incentives in different ways (Boardman, Bozeman, and Ponomariov 2010; Jurkiewicz and Brown 1998; Moynihan and Pandey 2007; Perry 1997). Descriptive statistics and the summary and description of all the measures used can be found in the Appendix.

In order to understand what motivates public servants in Kazakhstan we included 6 items in our survey which cover the major reasons for joining public service. The results are reported in Table 1.

The desire for stability for Kazakhstani public servants takes precedence over the opportunity to contribute to decisions crucial for society and a chance to learn. At the same time, high pay is in the bottom half of the ranking which is an interesting finding for what may be considered a multi-incentive setting. We will further explore this finding in our qualitative analysis and discussion of the results. Standard deviation values indicate a rather unanimous affinity towards stability, a desire to contribute to important decisions, and knowledge, while the aspirations for a higher income and social connections are not as commonly shared across the respondents.

We proceed to find out how pursuit of the two major types of external rewards – job security and high pay relate to PSM, job satisfaction and turnover intention. The findings are presented in Table 2.

The results lend strong support to the assumption that pursuit of job security as the reason for joining public service may have a positive association with PSM and job satisfaction, and a negative association with turnover intention. All three regression models demonstrate statistically significant results for the pursuit of job security.

Indeed, our results demonstrate that job security is a key driver to join the public service. However, in order to get a more precise picture of key areas of improvement, and current constraints, we categorized and coded 481 responses to our open survey questions – “Which measure or reform would be most effective in Kazakhstan to increase the efforts of public officials to perform?”, and “What is currently the biggest obstacle for enhancing the motivation of public officials in Kazakhstan?” – resulting in 13 main coding categories which we juxtapose with the turnover intention as indicated by the respondents, in Table 3. The numbers indicate the number of statements corresponding with the particular code.

While high pay is not the major reason public servants choose to join the public service, it remains a significant obstacle to better performance and motivation for public servants across the board. At the same time, job security as a concern does not show up in the responses, as no one mentioned unfair or unreasonable termination of employment as a threat or an obstacle. It may seem that, given the reform efforts of the recent years, job security is a fixture of the system for Kazakhstani public servants. Speaking out on the issue of the most necessary reform initiative to tackle the existing problems, both groups

| Reasons for joining | Mean | SD  |
|---------------------|------|-----|
| Stable, secure and promising future. | 4.13 | .729 |
| A chance to make a contribution to important decisions. | 4.11 | .697 |
| A chance to learn new things. | 4.00 | .793 |
| High prestige and social status. | 3.45 | 1.110 |
| To increase opportunities for earning income. | 2.84 | 1.117 |
| To build a strong network of connections. | 2.69 | 1.084 |
are like-minded in their support of increased pay, combatting corruption, providing better working conditions, and expanding professional development opportunities.

These qualitative results serve as complementary evidence to our quantitative results. As public servants themselves indicate, they highly value the stability and the security with which a public service job is associated. Our findings suggest a strong association between pursuit of job security, job satisfaction and lower turnover intention. While our respondents indicate that high pay is not an important reason for joining the public service, analysis of the qualitative data shows that public servants still view low pay as the major obstacle to further progress of the public service of Kazakhstan. Indeed: the fact that they know pay is low and may continue to be so for a considerable time, may explain why it is not a key reason for joining the public sector. That corruption is considered a major problem by our respondents, and also in international indices may be related to the need to garner additional income and the opportunities public service employment provide in this regard (Pande and Jain 2014).

To conclude, with our study we aimed to demonstrate that pursuit of job security may not deserve its reputation for negatively impacting employee motivation and positive work attitudes and outcomes. In summary, our findings show that:

1. Kazakhstani public servants highly value job security, which takes precedence over the desire to contribute to important decisions and attain new knowledge;

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**Table 2.** Findings of the OLS regression analysis.

| Independent variables                  | PSM     | Job satisfaction | Turnover intention |
|----------------------------------------|---------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Pursuit of job security                | .244*** (.027) | .260*** (.033) | −.230*** (.056) |
| Gender                                 | .207*** (.042) | .022 (.052)     | .202* (.087)      |
| Age                                    | .102** (.031)  | .137*** (.038)  | −.050 (.064)      |
| Education                              | −.008 (.023)   | .030 (.028)     | .020 (.047)       |
| Government level                       | −.023 (.042)   | .044 (.052)     | −.219* (.087)     |
| Public service experience              | −.061*** (.019) | −.067*** (.024) | .047* (.040)      |
| Supervision of employees               | .104* (.047)   | .175** (.057)   | −.278** (.096)    |
| Constant                               | 2.525     | 2.378           | 3.535             |
| N                                      | 627       | 627             | 627               |
| Adjusted R-squared                     | .162      | .112            | .053              |

**Table 3.** Qualitative findings.

| Biggest obstacle                          | Number of responses | Possible solution                                      | Number of responses |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Low pay                                   | 217                 | Pay rise and benefits                                  | 253                 |
| Corruption and nepotism                   | 71                  | Civil service reform                                   | 35                  |
| Long working hours and heavy workload     | 23                  | Effective work organization and time management        | 42                  |
| Low competence and qualification          | 26                  | Training and professional development                  | 22                  |
| Miscellaneous (red tape; housing; lack of promotion; unfair treatment; lack of autonomy; low citizen trust) | 66 | Combat corruption                                      | 27                  |
| None                                      | 21                  | Miscellaneous (professionalism and expertise; better working conditions; fair promotion; respectful attitude; housing; reduce paperwork and red tape) | 58                  |
| I don’t know                              | 57                  | None                                                  | 17                  |
|                                           | I don’t know        |                                                       | 27                  |
| Total                                     | 481                 | Total                                                 | 481                 |
2. The pursuit of job security is positively correlated with PSM, job satisfaction, and negatively correlated with turnover intention; and
3. The main areas for improvement that are likely to enhance employee motivation in the eyes of Kazakhstani public servants are: paying a fair wage, eliminating corruption and nepotism, optimizing working conditions and organizational procedures, as well as providing more training and professional development opportunities.

6. Motivating public servants in developing contexts: lessons for practice

Our key findings generate important policy implications for Kazakhstan and countries with similar framework conditions and administrative histories and traditions. With the exception of the Baltic states, and in some respects, Georgia, post-Soviet countries continue to face development challenges, and need to overcome constraints and reform institutions inherited from the Soviet Union (Baimenov and Liebert 2019; Liebert 2014). Despite the divergence in policy choices and the intensity of public service reforms, the issues of corruption and nepotism, inefficient work organization, and low pay, highlighted by the Kazakhstani public servants in their responses, remain common across the region (Astana Civil Service Hub 2018; Baimenov and Janenova 2019).

While there is little evidence on the extent of job security in former Soviet countries other than Kazakhstan, previously, Kazakhstan’s positive experience in reforming public service was noted by the countries in the region, and is said to have inspired similar initiatives elsewhere in the region, for example in Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine (Baimenov and Janenova 2019). More recently, Uzbekistan in an unprecedented bid to overhaul its governance system, embarked upon ambitious anti-corruption reforms backed by the country’s establishment (OECD 2019). Common challenges, a shared institutional past, as well as the propensity towards importing “best practices”, in an attempt to satisfy the requirements of the international donors, rather than adopting localized solutions, make Kazakhstan’s experience a viable policy option for countries in the region that are limited in their ability to collect robust evidence for practice.

Below, we identify three key lessons for practitioners, scholars, and experts.

1. In a setting where public service ethos is still in its developmental phase, multiple incentives guide the behavior of public servants. Job security remains a major factor for public servants in choosing a job. It is an attractive feature of public service employment that helps with both recruiting and retaining employees (Jurkiewicz, Massey, and Brown 1998; Hur and Perry 2019; Matheson 2012). This means that policymakers responsible for formulating and implementing human resource management reforms and strategies, non-monetary incentives need to be leveraged more effectively to attract talented individuals, emphasizing the ‘job security brand’ of public service careers. This may also serve as an effective way for offsetting deficiencies in pay, which is a major concern for public servants as demonstrated in the qualitative part of the survey.

2. Our findings challenge the perception that the pursuit of external incentives has an undesirable effect on motivation and work attitudes, which partly informs the current
wave of efficiency-driven reforms relying on PSM as the main behavioral driver (and, sometimes use the intrinsically oriented profile of public servants as an excuse for cutbacks or freezes in pay and job security). We show that pursuing job security may have a positive association with motivation (Frey and Jegen 2001; Frey and Osterloh 2005), as it serves the purpose of satisfying needs rather than wants. Work arrangements which guarantee a stable job seem to have a positive correlation with such desirable outcomes as job satisfaction and lower turnover intention, as it provides the security necessary for performance (Gerhart and Fang 2015).

At the same time, however, enhancing job security calls for more mechanisms to protect merit-based career and performance regimes to minimize political interference in personnel decisions. More specifically, countries such as Kazakhstan, which find themselves at a critical juncture of reform implementation, without planning to raise pay in the foreseeable future, should strive to strengthen job security and utilize its potential as an attractive feature while simultaneously minimizing politicization of the public service. Concrete steps in maintaining job security may include emphasizing this aspect of a public service career at the recruitment and selection stage, as well as preserving the legal guarantees of protection against at-will dismissals, eschewing the contract-based employment system. Measures to maintain job security need to go hand in hand with positive efforts to manage performance. Overly stringent and punitive regulations that threaten dismissal in case of underperformance may be alarming for potential candidates, especially in the context of nepotism. Re-training and probationary periods are some of the steps that may be taken to manage performance in a positive way.

1. Like in many developing settings, insufficient pay and benefits are a source of grievance, as are unfair treatment and lack of opportunities due to corruption and nepotism. All of these are red flags which should feature prominently on the reform agenda in Kazakhstan and similar contexts. Absence of job security as one of the major concerns as indicated by respondents, on the other hand, provides indirect evidence that job security remains an integral characteristic of public service. The qualitative approach itself proved to be an outlet for public servants to weigh in on the reform debate, and voice their concerns and suggest possible solutions. Employing surveys for evidence-generation may potentially contribute towards creating ownership and localizing policy-making rather than importing ready-made solutions from starkly different contexts.

In the wake of the current pre-occupation with removing tenure and job protection and increasing flexibilization in more developed contexts, our findings have major policy implications for multi-incentive settings like Kazakhstan where job security is a major motivating factor for public servants. The concern that Kazakhstan and countries with similar contexts may move away from job security is quite real: Kazakhstan and other countries in the post-Soviet region have historically followed the path of transplanting “blueprints” or “best practices” from developed countries (Janenova and Knox 2017). This is a way of signaling commitment to reform on which financial support from international donors is conditional (Baimenov and Janenova 2019); turning
what should be genuine reform into a constant gaming strategy. One example is reorganizing bureaucracies simply to be rated highly on international indices of business friendliness (Arrunada 2007; Schueth 2015); a process also known as isomorphic mimicry (Grindle 2004; Andrews 2013).

Thus, the prudent approach should be that of “solving problems, not selling solutions” (Andrews, Pritchett, and Woolcock 2013) and encouraging developing countries to develop their own line of thinking about how local problems should be solved based on the past experiences and present conditions. Capitalizing on job security as an important factor of public service employment’s attractiveness, and avoiding overreliance on externally enforced notions from historically different Western traditions of public service, may be more beneficial for countries like Kazakhstan.

These results, however, do not exclude the necessity of recruiting and attaining individuals with an inclination to serve the public and create public value. Further, future research is needed to distinguish between different degrees of job security and job insecurity, in place of treating them as opposite ends of the scale. Still, job security as a driver should be borne in mind as an additional asset as some, if not most, individuals will display a mixed-incentive pattern of behavior (Perry 2014). Hence, it is critical that different types of external rewards that affect employee attitudes differently are not put in the same basket, but are examined, assessed, and reformed separately. More research is needed into other types of external rewards such as prestige and social status, as well as power and influence, and how they affect job satisfaction and performance in public agencies subject to reform.

Note

1. Comparative fit index (CFI) = 0.932, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = 0.911, standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR) = 0.04, and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) = 0.061 (90% confidence interval RMSEA = 0.053, 0.068). The standardized item-factor loadings are over 0.5 (ranging between 0.57 and 0.96).

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ORCID

Assel Mussagulova http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8291-5084
Zeger Van der Wal http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4872-3342

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