

IMAGINING KAZAKHSTAN'S FUTURE: YOUTH PERCEPTIONS AND SYMBOLIC REPRESENTATIONS

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Abstract. The article examines how young people in Kazakhstan perceive the future of the country, employing a mixed-method approach that combines data from a national survey and focus-group discussions. Quantitative findings demonstrate a predominance of positive assessments of the country's current development trajectory, a moderately optimistic emotional background, and a high level of trust in near-term prospects. Qualitative analysis reveals the symbolic and value-based structures underlying these expectations, including perceptions of a just, technologically advanced, and socially responsible state; the importance attributed to education; and the value placed on personal freedom and security. The data reveal a complex and multidimensional image of the future constructed by young people and highlight their role as bearers of modernization potential and agents of social transformation.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, youth, future image, social expectations, focus groups, national survey, values, symbolic representations, digitalization, modernization.

ҚАЗАҚСТАН БОЛАШАҒЫНЫҢ БЕЙНЕСІ: ЖАСТАРДЫҢ КӨЗҚАРАСЫ ЖӘНЕ СИМВОЛИКАЛЫҚ ҰҒЫМДАРЫ

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ОБРАЗ БУДУЩЕГО КАЗАХСТАНА: ВОСПРИЯТИЕ И СИМВОЛИЧЕСКИЕ ПРЕДСТАВЛЕНИЯ МОЛОДЕЖИ

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Аңдатпа. Бұл мақала Қазақстан жастарының ел болашағына деген көзқарастарын талдауға арналған және жаппай сауалнама мен фокус-топтық талқылауларды біріктіретін аралас әдіснамалық тәсілге негізделген. Сандық деректер жастар арасында елдің қазіргі даму бағытын оң қабылдау басым екенін, қалыпты оптимистік эмоционалдық фон мен жақын болашаққа деген жоғары деңгейдегі сенімді көрсетеді.

Сапалық талдау бұл күтілімдердің негізінде жатқан символикалық және құндылықтық құрылымдарды айқындауға мүмкіндік береді: әділетті, технологиялық және әлеуметтік жауапты мемлекет туралы түсініктер, білім берудің маңыздылығы, жеке еркіндік пен қауіпсіздік құндылықтары. Алынған деректер жастар қалыптастыратын болашақ бейнесінің көпқырлы және күрделі сипатын ашып көрсетеді, сондай-ақ олардың модернизациялық әлеуеттің негізгі тасымалдаушысы және әлеуметтік трансформациялардың маңызды агенті ретіндегі рөлін айқындайды.

Кілтті сөздер: Қазақстан, жастар, болашақ бейнесі, әлеуметтік күтілімдер, фокус-топтар, жаппай сауалнама, құндылықтар, символикалық ұғымдар, цифрландыру, жаңғырту.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу представлений казахстанской молодежи о будущем страны на основе смешанного методологического подхода, объединяющего данные национального массового опроса и фокус-групповых дискуссий. Количественные результаты демонстрируют преобладание среди молодежи позитивных оценок текущего курса развития страны, умеренно оптимистичный эмоциональный фон и высокую степень доверия к перспективам ближайших лет. Качественный анализ позволяет выявить символические и ценностные структуры, лежащие в основе этих ожиданий: представления о справедливом, технологичном и социально ответственном государстве, значимость образования, ценность личной свободы и безопасности. Полученные данные раскрывают сложный и многомерный образ будущего, формируемый молодежью, и подчеркивают ее роль как носителя модернизационного потенциала и агента общественных трансформаций.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан, молодежь, образ будущего, социальные ожидания, фокус-группы, массовый опрос, ценности, символические представления, цифровизация, модернизация.

Introduction

Research on perceptions of the future is gaining increasing relevance amid rising global uncertainty. In a world where technologies, labor models, political orientations, and social values are rapidly changing, youth become the main carriers of expectations, fears, and hopes that shape trajectories of societal development. Understanding how young people imagine the future provides insight into the meanings and directions of

modernization supported “from below,” and how attitudes influencing social cohesion, institutional trust, and readiness for transformation are formed.

This topic is particularly relevant for Kazakhstan, a country undergoing active political, economic, and cultural transformation. One indicator of how young people perceive the future is youth migration. According to the Bureau of National Statistics, in 2024 the net migration of people under 35 reached +11,193, whereas prior to 2022 the indicator had been consistently negative. These dynamics reflect not only economic factors but also the degree of young people’s confidence in opportunities for self-realization and social progress within the country.

Similar trends can be observed internationally. Future uncertainty, a crisis of trust, and unequal access to opportunities have become key sources of anxiety among youth across many countries. Comparable processes are recorded in Europe and East Asia, where young people increasingly express ambivalence between belief in progress and a sense of losing control over the future.

In this context, studying future perceptions among Kazakhstan’s youth has dual significance: first, as an indicator of the social well-being of a generation forming a new identity; and second, as an instrument for forecasting paths of societal development. Understanding how youth envision the future of Kazakhstan allows an assessment of the country’s long-term potential for social resilience and modernization.

Guided by these considerations, this study explores how young people in Kazakhstan imagine the future of the country, what social, political, and cultural elements they include in this image, and what values they consider central to personal and societal development. To achieve this goal, a mixed-method research design was employed, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches that make it possible to identify both general tendencies and the deeper meaning structures shaping young people’s worldviews.

Literature Review

The future and its perception by youth occupy an important place in contemporary sociology, cultural anthropology, and generational studies. Modern theoretical approaches converge around the idea that images of the future are not merely reflections of expectations but mechanisms of social action that shape development trajectories.

In the sociology of expectations (Brown & Michael, 2003), the future is understood as a social resource guiding actors’ behavior, especially under uncertainty. The concept of imagined futures (Beckert, 2016) emphasizes that economic and political decisions often rely on “fictional expectations” – representations of possible scenarios that can become self-fulfilling. The classical work of F. Polak *The Image of the Future* (1961/1973) laid the foundation for studying how cultural images and symbols of the future structure collective imaginaries and national ideals.

Youth are a key focus of research due to their unique role as carriers of social expectations. Arnett’s (2000) theory of emerging adulthood describes youth as a life stage in which aspirations and life scenarios form most intensively. Research on time perspective (Zimbardo & Boyd, 1999) shows that future orientation correlates

with education, career strategies, and institutional trust. From an anthropological perspective, Appadurai (2004) introduces the concept of the capacity to aspire, arguing that the ability to articulate one's future is unevenly distributed and closely tied to cultural and economic capital.

The transition to post-industrial and digital society has transformed not only tools of labor but also collective imaginaries. Beckert (2016) notes that digitalization and globalization create new images of progress in which uncertainty becomes the norm. Inglehart (1997) links these changes to the shift from modernization to postmodern values: from materialist orientations to self-expression and autonomy.

Thus, researching youth images of the future is crucial for understanding societal transformation, especially in countries undergoing rapid modernization, such as Kazakhstan. Youth actively construct new visions of potential development paths, the relationship between technology, labor, and values, and what the world of tomorrow should look like.

Methodology

This article employs a mixed-methods analytical approach based on data from two independent studies: the 2025 national survey and the 2024 focus-group discussions conducted on behalf of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data allows for a deeper understanding of how young people perceive the future of the country.

The quantitative component was based on a national survey of 8,000 respondents aged 18 and older, covering 17 regions and three major cities – Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. Fieldwork took place from March 20 to April 20, 2025.

For the purpose of this article, data for youth aged 18-29 were analyzed. Their share in the sample was 21.2% (1,698 respondents), with 62% residing in urban areas and 38% in rural areas. Gender distribution was almost equal: 50.9% male and 49.1% female. Regarding education, 45% reported having higher education, 29.5% technical-vocational education, and 25.5% secondary education. Linguistically, 54.4% chose Kazakh as the language of the survey, while 45.6% chose Russian.

The advantage of the mass survey lies in its ability to generalize findings at the national level and identify structural patterns in citizens' assessments and expectations. In this study, the quantitative analysis helped determine sociocultural contours of future perceptions and their dependence on region, age, and education.

To obtain deeper insights, focus-group discussions were conducted. This method allowed exploration not only of rational attitudes but also of emotional, value-based, and symbolic elements of future imaginaries.

A total of 10 regions participated: six cities (Aktau, Almaty, Karaganda, Kokshetau, Ust-Kamenogorsk, and Shymkent) and four rural settlements located in the North Kazakhstan Region, Abai Region, Zhambyl Region, and Aktobe Region. Data were collected from February 9 to February 18, 2024. In total, 101 participants aged 18-29 took part: 61 urban and 40 rural residents; 53 male and 48 female. Six focus groups were conducted in Kazakh (61 participants), and four in Russian (40 participants).

Participants represented three groups by occupation:

1. Students (40 participants) across various specializations, including law, finance, medicine, literature, sports, and eight master's students.

2. Working youth without higher education (21 participants) from rural areas, representing diverse occupations ranging from service and agriculture to technical positions.

3. Working youth with higher education (40 participants) employed as teachers, civil servants, engineers, cultural workers, and others.

Participation was voluntary, with informed consent and confidentiality ensured.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods enabled a comprehensive understanding of how youth form their visions of the future.

As part of the focus-group discussions, participants were invited to imagine Kazakhstan twenty years into the future and to articulate how they believe the country might evolve across social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. The year 2044 was chosen as a symbolic long-term horizon (approximately twenty years ahead), enabling participants to project their expectations about Kazakhstan's future when today's youth reach full adulthood and mid-career stages. The focus groups were specifically designed to explore how young people envision the country two decades from now and to construct a symbolic map of Kazakhstan in 2044, capturing their perceptions of opportunities, risks, values, and institutional development.

Results and Discussion

In line with the objective of the study – to identify how young people envision the future of Kazakhstan – both the data from focus-group discussions conducted across 10 regions of the country and the quantitative findings of the national survey were analyzed. The combined results made it possible to reconstruct the key elements of the social imaginary of youth, reflecting both individual expectations and collective visions of the future.

The survey results indicate that the assessment of the country's overall development trajectory shows a predominance of positive attitudes among young people in Kazakhstan. A total of 36.9% of respondents believe that Kazakhstan is developing "definitely in the right direction," while another 44.8% consider it to be "rather in the right direction." In aggregate, 81.7% of youth express agreement with a positive national trajectory. Meanwhile, 14.3% hold skeptical views, including 10.3% who believe the country is "rather in the wrong direction" and 4.0% who feel it is "definitely in the wrong direction" (Figure 1).

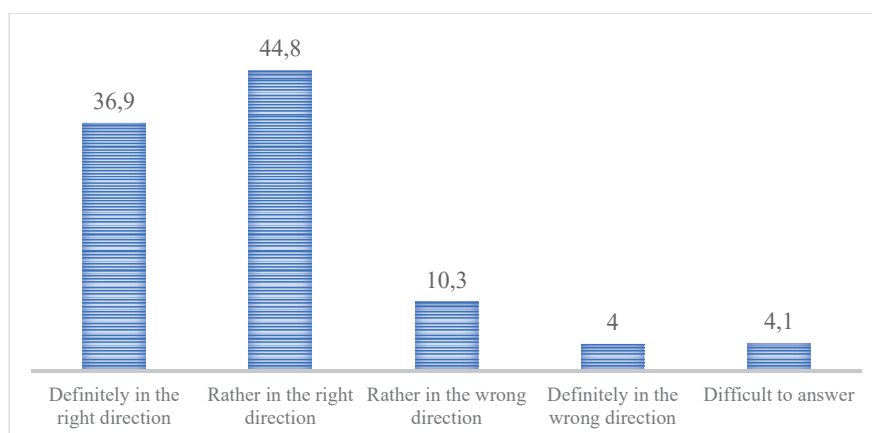


Figure 1. Distribution of responses to the question: “In your opinion, is Kazakhstan developing in the right or wrong direction?” (%)

Analysis of differences by type of settlement reveals that rural residents more frequently express confidence in the correctness of the country’s trajectory compared to urban residents (42.4% vs. 33.5% for the “definitely in the right direction” category). At the same time, urban youth demonstrate a higher share of “rather in the right direction” responses (47.1% vs. 41.0%), suggesting a more measured and moderately optimistic perception.

No significant differences were identified by gender, although a tendency is observed: young women more frequently choose moderately optimistic positions (49.2% vs. 40.5% among young men), whereas men are slightly more inclined toward polarized assessments – both positive and negative. For example, the share of “definitely in the wrong direction” responses is 5.7% among men compared to 2.3% among women.

Substantial differences emerge when analyzing economic well-being. The higher the household’s self-assessed financial stability, the more likely respondents are to express confidence in the country’s development. Among those who report that they “have enough money for everything, including purchasing a car or apartment,” 54.7% believe Kazakhstan is developing “definitely in the right direction.” Conversely, among economically vulnerable groups – those lacking sufficient income even for food – this share declines to 35.9%, while the combined share of critical evaluations (“rather” and “definitely in the wrong direction”) rises to 41%.

These results confirm the link between young people’s perceptions of the country’s future and their socio-economic well-being, while also demonstrating a considerable reserve of trust and optimism, particularly among rural youth and socially secure groups.

Table 1. Distribution of responses to the question: “In your opinion, is Kazakhstan developing in the right or wrong direction?” by type of settlement and gender (%)

	Type of settlement		Gender	
	Urban residents	Rural residents	Men	Women
Definitely in the right direction	33.5	42.4	37.8	35.9
Rather in the right direction	47.1	41.0	40.5	49.2
Rather in the wrong direction	10.9	9.3	12.3	8.3
Definitely in the wrong direction	4.3	3.6	5.7	2.3
Difficult to answer	4.3	3.7	3.8	4.3

Evaluation of the country's prospects for the next five years also demonstrates a predominantly positive outlook among young citizens (Figure 2). Nearly one-third of youth (29.8%) assess the prospects as very positive, while an additional 37.9% view them as rather positive. Altogether, 67.7% of young Kazakhstani citizens consider the country's near-term future in a positive light. This is a high indicator, suggesting trust in the state's development trajectory and a willingness to link personal and professional futures with Kazakhstan.

A significant share of youth holds neutral views (28.0%), which may reflect either caution in forming expectations or limited information or experience to establish firm positive or negative assessments. Negative views are minimal: 2.8% assess prospects as rather negative and only 1.5% as very negative.

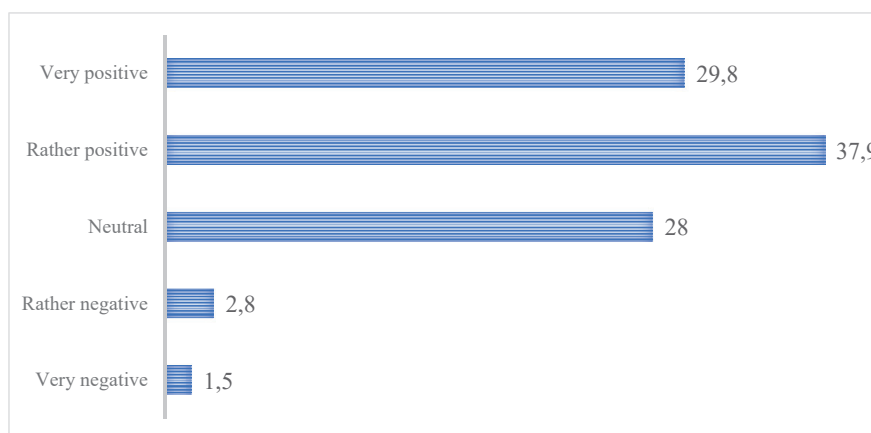


Figure 2. Distribution of responses to the question: “How do you assess the country's development prospects for the next five years?” (%)

In addition, the findings allow *identification of emotional and evaluative orientations of Kazakhstani youth* regarding the country's future (Figure 3). The emotional structure demonstrates a distinctly optimistic and constructive orientation. More than half (51.1%) of young respondents report hope as their primary feeling toward the future of Kazakhstan. This indicates a strong expectation of positive change, relating

both to personal opportunities and the country's broader development. A further 26.1% of young people experience optimism – a characteristic common among age groups oriented toward mobility and future possibilities.

At the same time, a degree of emotional uncertainty is present. A total of 12.7% of respondents report feeling uncertain about the future, and 6.3% feel anxious. The share of those expressing pessimism is just 2.4%, indicating that deep disappointment or a sense of lack of future prospects is rare among youth.

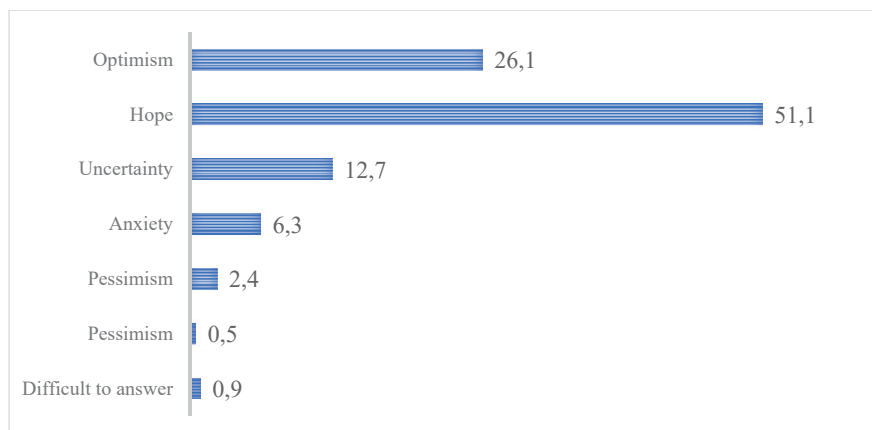


Figure 3. Distribution of responses to the question: “What feelings dominate your perception of the country’s future?” (%)

Overall, the survey results indicate that Kazakhstan’s youth maintain a largely positive and development-oriented outlook on the country’s future, accompanied by a moderate level of uncertainty among certain groups. Such a combination is typical for youth cohorts in transitional societies, where expectations of change coexist with a sense of uncertainty amid rapidly shifting social environments.

While the quantitative data reveal general trends in evaluations and emotional orientations, qualitative data enable an understanding of the specific meanings, values, and symbolic elements embedded in the youth’s vision of Kazakhstan’s future. These data expose how young people interpret their optimism, the risks they perceive, and the scenarios they consider likely or desirable.

Participants of the focus groups perceive the future of Kazakhstan as a logical continuation of the present, yet in a more just, technologically advanced, and sustainable form. The dominant image is that of a democratic, socially oriented, and economically strong state, characterized by stability, security, and equal opportunities.

Urbanization is seen as a major future trend, especially in the southern regions. Shymkent is perceived as a key emerging development cluster, while Astana is expected to maintain its status as the political and business capital. Almaty is imagined as the intellectual and cultural hub, whose development is contingent on overcoming accumulated infrastructure challenges. Rural areas retain significance due to ecological advantages and the potential of an export-oriented agro-industrial sector.

Digitalization is viewed as a central force shaping both economic and societal transformations. Qualitative data show that technological change, in the eyes of youth, represents the primary source of hope and a key instrument for progress. High technological literacy is associated with improved transparency, reduced corruption, and strengthened civic culture.

Education is perceived as the core institution of modernization. Secondary education, according to participants, should become more flexible and individualized, while higher education must achieve global competitiveness. Private education is expected to retain its niche role while complementing the public system.

Youth believe that the *institution of family* will remain important in the future, though in evolving forms: marriages are expected to occur later, yet formal registration remains the norm. Young people associate family stability with improvements in material and social conditions, and many express confidence that by 2044 Kazakhstan will achieve conditions that enable children to realize their potential within the country.

The future *image of government* retains a high symbolic status for national leadership. Youth prefer an archetype of a well-educated, relatable leader who succeeds through merit. The future state is imagined as open, efficient, and results-oriented.

Levels of trust in society remain uneven. Urban youth tend to trust experts, digital sources, and institutions more frequently, whereas rural youth rely on personal experience, elders, and religious leaders. Optimists link rising trust with education and anti-corruption efforts; pessimists highlight risks associated with individualism, information overload, and unstable legislation.

Youth also identify several key risks threatening the country's future: geopolitical instability and external conflicts; corruption and ineffective governance; dependence on raw material exports and a weak innovation economy; and environmental threats related to resource depletion.

In the realm of *international relations*, participants anticipate a continuation of multi-vector diplomacy with an additional southern vector – cooperation with Central Asian neighbors in agriculture, tourism, and the knowledge economy. Cultural diplomacy is viewed as a crucial tool for promoting Kazakhstan's positive international image.

Linguistically, participants support the model of trilingualism (Kazakh, Russian, and English) as the basis for competitiveness and mobility. At the same time, expectations are rising regarding the strengthening of the Kazakh language as a symbol of national unity and cultural consolidation.

Youth see themselves as key agents of the country's future. Their priorities include self-development, material well-being, family, freedom, and security. Personal growth is viewed as a means of achieving autonomy, while material success provides independence and confidence in the future. Family, despite traditional values, is understood as a space of personal freedom and partnership.

The categories of freedom and security hold multidimensional meanings – ranging from political rights and economic opportunities to personal self-realization and social protection. These aspects are directly associated by youth with the potential for innovative and creative development of the country.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that youth perceptions of Kazakhstan's future are shaped by moderate optimism, rational expectations, and a desire for stability and fairness. Quantitative data reveal widespread positive evaluations of the country's current trajectory and strong confidence in its prospects for the near future. Emotionally, hope and optimism dominate, accompanied by a moderate level of uncertainty characteristic of youth in transitional societies.

Qualitative analysis complements and deepens these findings by revealing a complex system of representations centered on the vision of a just, technologically advanced, and socially responsible state. Youth imagine the country's future as an evolutionary continuation of current processes, driven by education, digitalization, institutional openness, and human capital development.

Thus, the future envisioned by youth reflects a synthesis of hope and pragmatism. It demonstrates the generation's significant modernization potential and underscores the importance of long-term strategies focused on strengthening institutions, investing in human capital, and creating conditions for young people to realize their potential within their own country. The findings provide a foundation for further research and can inform youth and educational policies aligned with Kazakhstan's long-term national development trajectory.

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