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## MULTICHANNEL COMMUNICATION IN KAZAKHSTANI PUBLIC SERVICE: EXAMINING THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TOOLS

**Baurzhan Bokayev**

*National School of Public Policy, Academy of Public Administration  
under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
33a Abay Avenue, Astana, Kazakhstan*

**Zhadra Zhanzhigitova**

*Institute of Management, Academy of Public Administration  
under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
33a Abay Avenue, Astana, Kazakhstan*

**Kuralay Sadykova**

*Institute of Management, Academy of Public Administration  
under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
33a Abay Avenue, Astana, Kazakhstan*

**Assel Balmanova**

*Institute of Management, Academy of Public Administration  
under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan  
33a Abay Avenue, Astana, Kazakhstan*

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**Abstract.** *This article explores how alternative multichannel service provision can improve the way in which governments and citizens interact. Improvement is necessary because there is a gap between the communication channels that governmental bodies prefer and those that relate to citizens' preferences.*

*Obviously, the government chooses channels based on their cost efficiency, while citizens may choose channels depending on availability, context, and trust.*

*Based on the results of a survey of 4,606 civil servants in Kazakhstan, the authors consider which channels civil servants use to interact with the public, explore the role of digital tools in relation to public involvement in government decision-making, and analyze how this affects the effectiveness of the provision of public services.*

*The results of this study show that the effectiveness of communication directly depends on the availability of communication channels. When communicating with government*

agencies in Kazakhstan, the population uses well-known formal platforms in most cases. In addition, preference is given to personal communication channels, while public communication channels are not used to inform the population. In internal communications, civil servants use formal channels of communication. Finally, lines of personal communication are more developed in local executive bodies.

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**Keywords:** communication; civil servants; digital tools; channel of communication; Kazakhstan.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** komunikavimas; valstybės tarnautojai; skaitmeniai įrankiai; komunikavimo kanalai; Kazachstanas.

## Introduction

Kazakhstan occupies 28th place in the United Nations (UN) Global E-Government Development Index (EGDI) for the development of electronic government, and is in the top 10 among Asian countries (UN E-Government Knowledgebase 2022). The EGDI is a composite measure of three important dimensions of e-government: the provision of online services, telecommunications connectivity, and human capacity (UN E-Government Knowledgebase, n.d.).

According to the report of 12th edition of the UN E-Government Survey in 2022 (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2022), governments are publishing information about people's voices being included in policymaking, with specific e-participation measures implemented for vulnerable groups. Do these numbers actually demonstrate the current status of online services in Kazakhstan?

In order to achieve large-scale efficiency, public organizations digitalize their services. However, these efficiency goals can only be met if citizens adopt the digital services offered. Even though the government regularly assesses and evaluates the most effective ways to improve e-government, traditional offline channels such as telephone or in-person visits are still popular among citizens in Kazakhstan.

For government organizations, digitalization brings opportunities for enhanced efficiency and service improvement, but also presents new challenges related to managing public service encounters across multiple channels and organizations (Kernaghan 2013).

To meet public expectations, the government tries to provide credible responses, accountability, transparency and effective implementation. Only properly chosen and clearly defined communication channels can ensure effective dialogue between the population and the public sector. In order to deliver services most effectively and efficiently, governments should manage and position their service channels (Madsen and Hofmann 2019).

In terms of reliable lines of communication that facilitate the participation and interest of all parties, citizens should be able to communicate with governments about the services they need or want (Kernaghan 2013).

In this article, the main focus is on channels that facilitate the exchange of information between citizens and the government in Kazakhstan.

Citizens' preferences might differ in terms of which channel of communication they use. Moreover, users tend to prefer e-government services, but mostly when their use is mandated (Madsen and Kræmmergaard 2016). Starting as a business model, multichannel services rapidly changed the world (Moriarty and Moran 1990; Webb and Hogan 2002). The proliferation of multichannel services created opportunities for academics to produce insights that can help address this challenge (Neslin et al. 2006).

The tragic events of January 5, 2022 in Kazakhstan showed the low level of communicative competence of civil servants, as well as the lack of effective channels of communication between the state and the population (PR Drive 2022).

In this regard, this study aims to answer the following questions:

What digital communication channels are suitable for work with the public?

Why is it important to use multichannel communication in public service?

## **Literature review**

The role of public institutions is to maintain the relationship between the government and citizens through communication. Thus, efficient communication implies taking into consideration and removing disruptive factors, communication barriers, and noise (Fiske 1994). As a consequence, channels for communication between the government and citizens have become more essential. Subsequently, public servants tailor their services to meet customer needs because there is a strong relationship between problem-solving and improving public service distribution.

At present, the greatest threat to democracy is limited, incomplete access to information by the general public. This might lead to various problems such as misleading reforms, a lack of legitimacy, and a low level of trust. For this reason, information availability has changed significantly. By using new technologies, the government increases its capacity to disseminate a great deal of information. Moreover, through the process of communication, public authorities seek to establish a close relationship with citizens and become more focused on their demands and complaints.

Various types of channels are used by citizens to communicate with government organizations. The channels of communication chosen must be appropriate for the target audience, as using channels that are unsuitable might also result in information gaps.

The emergence of further channels (e.g., social media, SMS, mobile apps) and the public demand to interact through different means have increased the complexity of interaction and made governmental multichannel management even more important (Wirtz and Kurtz 2016). Therefore, there is strong interest within public service in the question of how to replace traditional channels with online channels.

When forming e-Government channels, key aspects need to be considered to make sure that the channels in place are used (Verdegem and Verleye 2009). Knowledge on how to employ channels to satisfy citizens and organizations comes from concepts of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). This research area provides valuable ideas

and experiences to cope with changing citizens (or customers) and a multitude of user preferences (Klievink and Janssen 2009; Schellong 2005).

The founders of all communication models consider communication channels as one of the most important elements of communication. Thus, according to the founder of the classical linear model of communication, Harold D. Lasswell, channels are an important element of the communication process and are considered an integral part of all communication processes (Lasswell 1948).

Researchers of communication models have paid special attention to the types of communication channels, how channels are perceived by recipients, and the accessibility of channels for target groups. This is where channel reliability and stability are important (McQuail and Windahl 2013).

The canons of public administration prescribe that civil servants must inform the public in an easily accessible form and ensure the availability of public documents (Figschou et al. 2021).

Communication is implied by subtler elements such as relationship management and identity projection. The way a message is conveyed is as important as the content of the message, and Hargie et al. (2003) defined news and information credibility as a guiding principle that can mitigate the tension between bureaucracy and the market.

Liu and Lai (2018) explored the importance of online communication channels, especially in times of crisis. Agostino and Arnaboldi (2017) consider social media channels as a potentially powerful tool in the hands of the public and authorities to support the evaluation of public service performance.

According to Mazdashvili et al. (2022), the intensity of the use of digital tools by governments should involve identifying tools that are trusted and popular with their audience and using these tools more to increase opportunities for feedback, citizen engagement, and commitment. Ease of use, transparency, ease of communication with the municipality, and security are cited as reasons for citizens' positive perception of social media. Therefore, local authorities should consider these features and develop the quality of online tools.

This concerns the idea of providing information in an accessible way by the state and effectively disseminating information to its citizens – in short, a way to make relations more equitable and increase the transparency of government activities (Matheus and Janssen 2020).

According to Hofmann et al. (2013), the bad reputation of government communication can be partly explained by the traditional use of one-way, offline mass communication channels that do not promote influential feedback and hinder productive dialogue between society and government.

## **Research method**

As part of this study, a sociological survey was conducted among 4,606 civil servants, of which 891 respondents were civil servants in central government bodies and 3,715 were civil servants in local executive bodies.

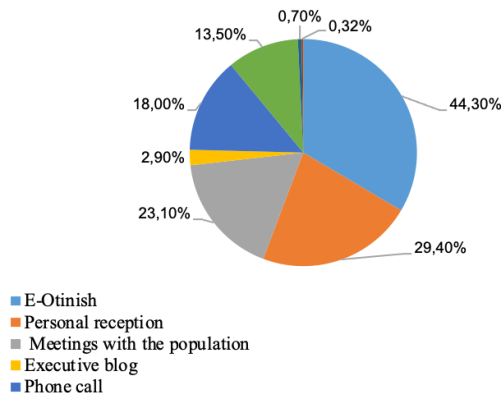
The survey was conducted from September to December 2022 in all regions of Kazakhstan, including the cities of Astana, Almaty and Shymkent. Participants were given the opportunity to complete the survey in Russian or Kazakh. The Google Forms platform was used to conduct the survey.

The questionnaire consisted of 42 questions related to: the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents; identifying the level of assessment by civil servants of the communicative competencies of colleagues, managers, local and central government bodies; determining the level of use of communication tools and channels by civil servants at the local and central level; identifying problems and barriers in communication with the population; and outlining the classification of effective means and channels used in the communication of a civil servant or a state body.

## Findings and discussion

The Internet penetration rate in Kazakhstan was 90.92% in 2021 (Von Kameke 2023), which represented a significant increase from 2011, when only 50.6% of the population had access to the internet. Experts predict that Kazakhstan will achieve 100% high-quality internet coverage, with 95% home broadband access, by 2025 (Satubaldina 2022).

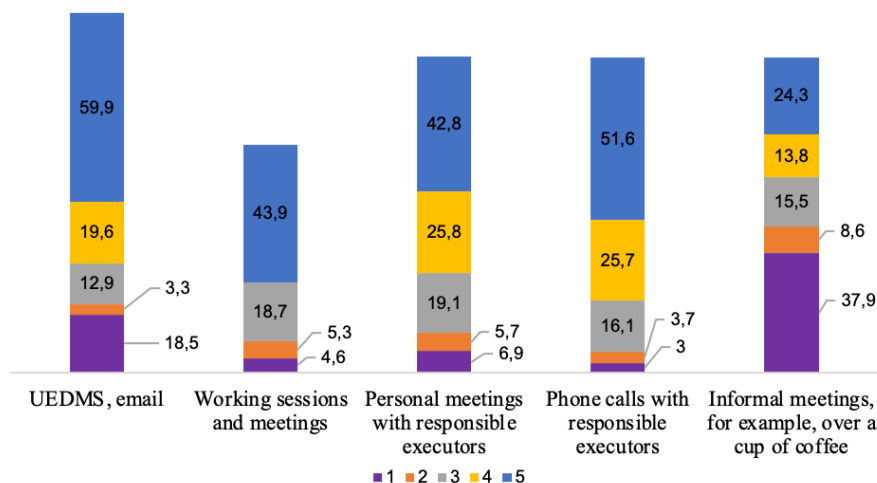
Despite this, the implementation of e-governance in the country faces many challenges. The accessibility of updated and well-structured communication channels affirms existing interactions with authorities. One result of this study was to determine the most frequently used channel of communication between state bodies and the population, where 44.3% of respondents selected E-Otinish as the main channel of communication with the population. As the main channel of communication, respondents also noted the following: personal reception – 29.4%; meetings with the population – 23.1%; phone calls – 18%; and social networks – 13.5%. The remaining channels, such as the leader’s blog (2.9%), the WhatsApp application, IS-koldau, E-license, the Akimat website and physical letters (0.32%), are used in rare cases.



**Figure 1.** *The main channels of communication with the population*

Among the structural division and other government agencies, the usage of the Unified electronic document management system (hereafter the UEDMS) channel and e-mail (59.9%) prevail. Moreover, 51.6% of respondents use telephone calls with responsible executors as a communication channel (Figure 2).

Obviously, the telephone is seen as the only channel by which civil servants can have direct contact with other government bodies today; electronic channels such as e-mail and e-services are not so prevalent in their work. Since the telephone can enable direct feedback, it has significance for customer service; however, in public service, communication via telephone is constrained by time. From civil servants' point of view, telephone communication causes much distraction as this is a very demanding job, and it is more difficult to handle than e-mail. Using e-mail largely depends on how each employee organizes their daily work. Personal contact, however, is conducted over the telephone because it establishes good relations and increases visibility.



**Figure 2.** Frequency of use of communication channels by civil servants with other structural units in their government agency (%)

These research findings show that despite great efforts in multichannel communication, the contribution of public service to e-governance has not increased – it has even fallen.

As with any communication process, it is normal that interventions and barriers arise and complicate the communication process. The communication channels used have to be in accordance with the level of the target audience; as we can see, this is still inappropriate and not advanced.

As stated previously, the main formal channel of communication is the E-Otinish electronic system. Initially, the goal of launching this system was to optimize work with

citizens' appeals and control their execution (Bokayev et al. 2022). E-Otinish is a computerized system that monitors the processing and handling of all complaints and is an integrated system among all government bodies. The main characteristics of E-Otinish are that it is public, informative, real-time, and accessible for any kind of platform (Bokayev et al. 2022). Even though the system has proved its effectiveness, it is still only one channel of communication. Other electronic platforms and websites of government bodies are practically not considered as communication channels, demonstrating insufficient work on communication channels by state bodies.

Having different channels of communication for users means a free choice between channels to access a service. However, for public servants, the separate development of different channels for a single service (multichannel delivery) can lead to inconsistencies such as different data formats or interfaces.

In terms of channel selection, channels must be selected from the available range of potential channels. To realize their potential value, however, channels also need to be properly implemented and operated.

According to a study by Reddick and Anthopoulos (2014), besides traditional channels (i.e., face-to-face contact, phone calls, and surface mail) and e-government options (i.e., web sites and e-mailing), new digital media (e.g., text messaging, social media, and mobile apps) are also used to access governments. Channel choice also seems to be dependent on the reason behind contacting governments; for example, e-government services are preferred for retrieving information and advice, whereas phone calls are primarily used in order to solve problems (Reddick and Anthopoulos 2014).

Public sector and government organizations must develop effective communication channels and commitments that directly link communities (Bokayev et al. 2021). More channels and more services do not necessarily lead to better customer orientation nor to a service that is more effective, particularly if channels and services are delivered improperly (Gagnon et al. 2010).

In order to improve their service provision, governments try to redesign service delivery channels. Existing delivery channels employed by government organizations through their websites, telephones, mail and front-desks do not answer the contemporary requirements of groups of citizens and the business segment (Klievink and Jansen 2008). Through the Internet, it became possible to connect to the user without the need for a front-desk or other channels. Additionally, because of the historical reliance of the public sector on hierarchy and bureaucracy, resistance to change is more deeply entrenched and more difficult to overcome. Even in the nations with the highest rates of internet usage, the results of online service delivery in the public sector have been modest and variable (Roy 2007).

While public organizations move towards electronic public service delivery, traditional channels of public service delivery continue to be leveraged for various reasons such as the digital divide, privacy and security concerns, as well as legislative requirements (European Commission 2004). This produces what is known as multichannel public service delivery, as public services are delivered through both online and offline channels (Lenk 2002; Wimmer 2002).

However, online public service delivery has generally failed in completely superseding traditional offline channels. From an operational viewpoint, such a multichannel approach actually creates more inefficiencies and increases operating costs. Better customer service, more consumer trust, and enhanced operational management are just some of the advantages that have been discovered through the optimal blending of online and offline channels.

## **Conclusion**

Experience and scholarly research show that the public sector, due to bureaucratic obstacles, fails to keep pace with rapid changes in service standards in the digital age (Dunleavy et al. 2006).

1. The introduction of information technology required special government equipment and the development of appropriate technological solutions, especially when creating a coherent government in a decentralized environment (Fishenden and Thompson 2013). The problem faced by most governments was fragmentation. Instead of this, we suggest the creation of integrated government portals. There is frequently a lack of integrity across government agencies, departments, and organizations, necessitating systemic adjustments on a fundamental level.
2. To overcome the drawbacks of multiple-channel service delivery, different channels should be integrated and coordinated (Caldow 2001). To enable this, the common data that are used by front office applications should be stored centrally so that they can be shared by different applications. Storing data centrally means that they need to be collected only once and that they can be accessed by back office applications. At present in Kazakhstan, the eGov and E-Otinish platforms use such a kind of shared application format.
3. To assess the results of digitization, we suggest the use of the Consulting in Public Administration Economy and Society Index as a tool, as recommended by the European Commission (2020) in the DESI report, according to which we can measure the development of: (1) high-speed Internet connectivity infrastructure; (2) ultra-structures of human capital development; (3) the use of the Internet; (4) the integration of digital technologies into business; and (5) the digital coverage of the public sector.
4. From our research, the different interpretations of multichannel services by different government bodies became obvious. Therefore, our suggestion is to adopt an internal or external perspective on multichannel management from diverse levels of public management.
5. Our findings also suggest that in order to comprehend employees' work obligations and content, it is crucial to comprehend how access points between citizens and public officials are changing in a multichannel environment.



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B. Bokayev, Z. Zhazhigitova, K. Sadykova, A. Balmanova

## DAUGIAKANALIS KOMUNIKAVIMAS KAZACHSTANO VALSTYBĖS TARNYBOJE: SKAITMENINIŲ ĮRANKIŲ ANALIZĖ

**Anotacija.** Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip alternatyvus daugiakanalis paslaugų teikimas gali pagerinti Kazachstano Vyriausybės ir piliečių sąveiką. Tobulinimas būtinas, kadangi egzistuoja atotrūkis tarp komunikavimo kanalų, kuriems vyriausybės institucijos

*cijos teikia pirmenybę, ir kanalus, kurie susiję su piliečių pageidavimais. Akivaizdu, kad Vyriausybė pasirenka kanalus pagal jų ekonomiškumą, o piliečiai gali pasirinkti kanalus atsižvelgdami į prieinamumą, situaciją ir pasitikėjimą.*

*Remdamiesi 4606 Kazachstano valstybės tarnautojų apklausos rezultatais autoriai svarsto, kokius kanalus valstybės tarnautojai naudoja bendraudami su visuomene: tiria skaitmeninių įrankių vaidmenį visuomenės įtraukimo į vyriausybės sprendimų priėmimą lygmeniu ir analizuoja, kaip tai daroma ir kiek tai turi įtakos viešųjų paslaugų teikimo efektyvumui.*

*Tyrimo rezultatai rodo, kad komunikavimo efektyvumas tiesiogiai priklauso nuo komunikavimo kanalų prieinamumo. Kazachstano gyventojai, bendraudami su vyriausybinėmis įstaigomis, dažniausiai naudojami gerai žinomomis oficialiomis platformomis. Be to, pirmenybė teikiama asmeniniams komunikacijos kanalams. Viešieji komunikacijos kanalai nenaudojami kaip gyventojų informavimo kanalai. Vidinėje komunikacijoje valstybės tarnautojai naudoja formalius komunikavimo kanalus. Asmeninio bendravimo linijos labiau išplėtotos vietinio lygmens vykdomosiose institucijose.*

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**Baurzhan Bokayev**, PhD, professor at the National School of Public Policy of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana, Kazakhstan. Email: [bbokayev@syr.edu](mailto:bbokayev@syr.edu)

**Zhadra Zhanzhigitova**, PhD candidate at the Institute of Management of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Email: [z.zhanzhigitova@apa.kz](mailto:z.zhanzhigitova@apa.kz)

**Kuralay Sadykova**, PhD, professor, deputy director of the Institute of Management of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Email address: [k.sadykova@apa.kz](mailto:k.sadykova@apa.kz)

**Assel Balmanova**, PhD candidate at the Institute of Management of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in Astana, Kazakhstan.

Email: [a.balmanova@apa.kz](mailto:a.balmanova@apa.kz)

---

**Baurzhan Bokayev** – Viešojo administravimo akademijos prie Kazachstano Prezidento Nacionalinio viešosios politikos instituto profesorius, mokslų daktaras (Astana, Kazachstanas)

E. paštas [bbokayev@syr.edu](mailto:bbokayev@syr.edu)

**Zhadra Zhanzhigitova** – Viešojo administravimo akademijos prie Kazachstano Prezidento Vadybos instituto doktorantė (Astana, Kazachstanas)

E. paštas [z.zhanzhigitova@apa.kz](mailto:z.zhanzhigitova@apa.kz)

**Kuralay Sadykova** – Viešojo administravimo akademijos prie Kazachstano Prezidento Vadybos instituto vykdančioji direktorė, profesorė, mokslų daktarė (Astana, Kazachstanas)

E. paštas [k.sadykova@apa.kz](mailto:k.sadykova@apa.kz)

**Assel Balmanova** – Viešojo administravimo akademijos prie Kazachstano Prezidento Vadybos instituto doktorantė (Astana, Kazachstanas)

E. paštas [a.balmanova@apa.kz](mailto:a.balmanova@apa.kz)