

Value Orientations of Young Students (Ages 18–23) in Kazakhstan: Findings from an Urban University Sample

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Abstract. *We analyze value orientations among urban university students (ages 18–23) in Kazakhstan using a cross-sectional survey (n = 600) and 20 semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face on university premises in Almaty and Astana (Oct–Nov 2024). The questionnaire adapts WVS-7 items via double translation and piloting; interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. Scope is limited to students in two cities. Results. At the individual level, students prioritize self-enhancement: 64% name financial stability as a key goal and 81% emphasize career advancement; leisure/time autonomy is important to 83%. Health is widely valued (65% monitor it, though 33% report no systematic approach). At the social level, family remains central (e.g., 97% prioritize relatives' health/safety; 96% intra-family relations; 95% family prosperity; 91% intergenerational ties), while wider non-family circles are thinner. Institutionally, ideals of transparency/fairness are endorsed, but confidence is cautious: 25% trust those in power; 29.8% report trusting no public sources at all. Civically, respondents support lawful avenues (authorized rallies) and community responsibility, yet engagement is selective (34% express interest in socio-political life; 29% report volunteering). Environmental concern is affirmed in principle, but salience is uneven: 23.4% do not believe climate change is real. Contribution. The value profile blends enduring family-centered norms with pragmatic individualism and critical-loyal views of institutions. Findings inform higher-education policy and student support (civic-engagement infrastructure, career transition and financial-literacy services, environmental literacy), rather than nationwide youth policy. Limitations include urban student focus and cross-sectional design; we outline longitudinal and comparative extensions.*

Keywords: young students; university students; value orientations; institutional trust; civic attitudes; Kazakhstan; WVS-aligned measures.

JEL Codes: I23; Z10; Z13; Z19; J24; Y80.

1. Introduction

In the first decades following independence, Kazakhstan underwent large-scale sociopolitical changes that significantly influenced the value orientations of its youth. The abrupt transition from Soviet ideology to the construction of a national state was accompanied by an official ideological vacuum and a simultaneous revival of traditional values and religion. Studies show that the post-Soviet generation of Kazakhstani

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citizens, who came of age outside the communist system, has gradually been reassessing its priorities, although fundamental collectivist values have remained intact (Adilova et al., 2021; Beissenova et al., 2014). Thus, despite profound social transformations, young people still prioritize family values, stability, and respect for the older generation, reflecting the mechanism of intergenerational transmission of enduring cultural elements. At the same time, today's youth display traits that distinguish them from their Soviet predecessors: a more pronounced individualism, a drive for personal achievement, and a pursuit of material success in the context of market reforms (Laruelle, 2019). This so-called "Nazarbayev generation," whose childhood and adolescence unfolded under the first president, on the one hand became a product of the economic liberalism of the 1990s–2000s, and on the other hand served as a target of deliberate state policies concerning national education (Burkhanov et al., 2019). The state actively promoted the idea of a qualitatively new generation, free from the Soviet legacy (Beylur, 2020), which manifested in the revival of the Kazakh language and cultural traditions, the heightened role of Islam in society, and the formation of a nationwide identity. Sociological data confirm the rising interest of young people in religion: the proportion of young Kazakhstanis who deem it important to instill religious faith in children grew significantly from 9% in 2011 to 17% in 2018 (Sharipova, 2020). According to researchers, this new generation, which never experienced Soviet ideology, naturally turns to Islamic values and national traditions in its search for self-identification (Ileuova, 2023). These processes reflect the complex interweaving of modernization and retraditionalization trends in the sphere of youth values in Kazakhstan.

Since independence, Kazakhstan has undergone substantial socio-economic change—market reforms, urbanization, expansion of higher education, and rapid digitization. Youth socialization has unfolded within this shifting environment, producing a hybrid value profile in which enduring family-centered norms coexist with rising individual aspirations. Prior research documents both continuity (family, intergenerational obligations, respect for order) and gradual shifts toward self-realization and entrepreneurship (e.g., WVS-aligned studies; Inglehart/Schwartz frameworks).

Against this background, the early 2020s brought adjustments in policy and administration as well as livelier public debate about institutions. In this article we deliberately refrain from classifying regime types or narrating specific political episodes. Instead, we treat the context in general terms—as a moving institutional and information environment that may shape expectations about fairness, opportunity, and institutional performance. Our empirical focus is not politics per se but observed value orientations among young students.

We analyze urban university students (ages 18–23) in Almaty and Astana using a WVS-aligned survey (n = 600) and 20 semi-structured interviews (Oct–Nov 2024). The analysis is organized across four layers—individual, social, institutional, and civic—and reports distributions and thematically coded interview material. Given the design and scope, inferences are descriptive and limited to students in two cities. The contribution is twofold: (i) an updated student-focused portrait of value orientations that can inform university-level policy and student services (e.g., civic engagement infrastructure, career transition and financial literacy modules, environmental literacy); and (ii) comparable indicators that can be reused in longitudinal and cross-regional extensions. For general background on youth socialization, institutional context, and external influences in Kazakhstan, see Adilova et al. (2021); Beissenova et al. (2014); Junisbai & Junisbai (2020); Kenzhebayeva et al. (2018); Junisbai et al. (2017); Kudaibergenova & Laruelle (2022); Thorez (2022); Chapman & Zhandayeva (2023); Sharipova & Beimenbetov (2021); Laruelle (2019); Zhussipbek & Nagayeva (2019).

Regarding Western influence, it often appears as a cultural and educational benchmark. Through scholarship programs such as “Bolashak,” thousands of young Kazakhstanis have studied in Europe and the United States, assimilating aspects of Western political culture and human rights values. Globalization and digitalization have opened access to worldwide informational resources, social media platforms, and international discussions, fostering a more universalist worldview among advanced segments of youth. Nevertheless, the adoption of “Western” values proceeds selectively. Many young specialists who have been educated in the West participate in civic initiatives and volunteer movements, promoting values such as transparency, environmental responsibility, and gender equality (Khassenova, 2020). However, the broader youth population continues to exhibit a certain detachment from Western political models: according to opinion polls, only a minority view the liberal democracies of the United States or Europe as a suitable model for Kazakhstan, whereas most either favor a distinct path or look to nearer neighbors. This ambivalence reflects the complexity of value transformation: the younger generation is simultaneously embedded in global cultural contexts and rooted in local tradition.

Contemporary Kazakhstani youth find themselves at the intersection of multiple influences—post-Soviet structures, national reforms, and global trends—which predetermines the hybrid nature of their value orientations. While preserving continuity in core values (family, stability, respect for order), young Kazakhstanis increasingly exhibit new traits: a drive for self-realization and entrepreneurship, a rise in critical attitudes toward authority, and a demand for social justice. The geopolitical shifts and domestic reforms of recent years have accelerated the evolution of youth values, making them more dynamic and open to change (Zharkynbekova et al., 2025). This dynamism manifests, on the one hand, in the continued pursuit of modernization and pluralism (e.g., tolerance for cultural diversity, technological and global engagement), and on the other hand, in an awareness of individual identity and rights within the state. In this study, we track how the value profile of the “New Kazakhstan” generation develops, those who will shape the country’s future, develops under these new historical conditions. The present study aims to analyze these processes and phenomena, offering a comprehensive view of the transformation of Kazakhstani young university students’ value orientations in light of recent political reforms and external influences.

2. Research Elaboration

2.1. Methodology

We combined a WV S-7-aligned survey (n = 600) with 20 semi-structured interviews (Oct–Nov 2024). Survey items were double-translated (Kazakh/Russian) and piloted; quantitative analysis relied on descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Interview audio was transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic content analysis. A hermeneutic reading was used only to adjudicate context-dependent meanings during coding—for example, distinguishing (i) “trust” directed at authorities from (ii) “trust” as interpersonal reliability; and separating “volunteering” framed as charity from “volunteering” as career signaling. For comparative context, selected indicators were benchmarked to Kazakhstan’s WVS-7 (2018). We report only those analytical procedures actually used in coding and analysis.

To achieve the study’s objectives, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was employed for data collection and analysis. During the preparatory stage, secondary sources were analyzed, including a systematic review of archival materials and findings from prior sociological studies, which enabled the identification of persistent trends in youth value changes. In addition, expert assessments were incorporated to broaden interpretive capacity and ensure a multi-perspective view of the problem (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2015). Data from several relevant studies on values in Kazakhstan (Seidumanov & Nurmuratov, 2022;

Institut, 2021; Kazakhstan, 2020; Kazakhstan, 2024) also served as a contextual basis; their results were taken into account when interpreting the empirical data obtained. The core of the empirical component of this work consisted of an original sociological survey and a series of in-depth interviews with young people.

The survey questionnaire was administered among young university students in Almaty and Astana, comprising a structured instrument divided into several thematic sections that covered key spheres of values. These included family values and relationships; religious beliefs and spiritual orientations; sociopolitical views, civic identity, and activity; as well as life goals and career aspirations. The questionnaire was predominantly composed of closed-ended questions with fixed response options (including rating scales), facilitating subsequent quantitative data processing. At the same time, the survey contained several open-ended questions that allowed respondents to identify the values most important to them or to provide extended comments. This enhanced the survey results with qualitative information and provided deeper insights into the youth's value priorities. The questionnaire was developed based on a standardized instrument from the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS), thus ensuring comparability of the collected data with international research findings and confirming the content validity of the measured indicators. To adapt the instrument to the local context, the questions were translated into Kazakh and Russian through a double-translation procedure that minimized semantic distortion. Prior to the main study, a pilot test of the questionnaire was conducted on a small group of respondents, helping to verify comprehension of the questions and the logical structure of the thematic blocks, thereby improving the instrument's reliability.

The target population for inference is young university students (ages 18–23) enrolled in universities in Almaty and Astana. We reserve the term “youth” for legal definitions (ages 14–35) and for literature comparisons; all empirical claims in this paper concern the student sample. The survey encompassed 600 respondents, including 346 women and 254 men. The sample was formed through purposive selection at universities in the country's two largest cities—Almaty and Astana—primary centers of youth concentration and higher education. When selecting respondents, the main demographic characteristics of student youth in these metropolitan areas (specifically gender and age) were considered to ensure the sample's representativeness. Participation was voluntary: all respondents provided informed consent. The inclusion criteria were membership in the 18–23 age group, active student status at the time of the survey, and agreement to participate.

Scope note. While Kazakhstan's law defines youth broadly (ages 14–35), our empirical evidence concerns young university students aged 18–23 in Almaty and Astana. Accordingly, we use “young students” when presenting our data and reserve “youth” for legal definitions and literature discussing the broader age cohort.

We carried out fieldwork in Oct–Nov 2024, using the face-to-face formal interview method. Trained interviewers conducted the survey in person on university premises, filling out the questionnaires based on the participants' answers. The face-to-face format minimized the risk of misunderstandings and ensured more complete, higher-quality responses. All interviewers received preliminary training and adhered to uniform instructions. The procedures for conducting the survey strictly followed international ethical standards for sociological research, including the principles of voluntary informed consent, confidentiality, and interviewer neutrality, in line with the ICC/ESOMAR Code and WVS fieldwork guidelines.

In addition to the survey, the qualitative phase of the study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with young students aged 18–23 who agreed to share their views in detail. The interviews followed a specially designed guide—a set of open-ended questions addressing topics consistent with the main blocks of the questionnaire: family attitudes and priorities;

religious and spiritual values; civic position and political participation; professional plans and self-realization values. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh and Russian, according to participant preference (interviewer and language were matched to the respondent). This format allowed participants to freely convey their opinions and discuss personal experiences, revealing nuances of value orientations not always captured by standard survey methods. We audio-recorded all interviews (~60 minutes each) and transcribed them verbatim.

We analyzed data using descriptive statistics; calculated proportions/means; constructed cross-tabulations; compared student indicators to WVS-2018; applied thematic content analysis; coded transcripts; and triangulated qualitative with quantitative findings. During the qualitative processing stage, transcripts were coded, and key themes and meaning categories were identified, enabling the systematization of respondents' opinions. The resulting qualitative and quantitative findings were then juxtaposed (through inter-method triangulation) for mutual corroboration of conclusions and to strengthen the credibility of the interpretations.

The methodology described here provided the requisite level of scholarly rigor and transparency in all procedures, establishing the conditions for a high degree of reliability in the results obtained. Although direct statistical estimates of error or reliability (e.g., internal consistency coefficients for individual scales) were not calculated, validation of the methodology is supported by the use of tested WVS instruments, adherence to international data collection standards (Rea & Parker, 2014), and the combination of multiple research methods. Employing standardized measures verified in international practice and ensuring the sample's representativeness bolster the validity of the data. Moreover, the alignment of quantitative and qualitative findings further affirms both their reliability and substantive validity. Thus, the integration of these approaches and procedures allows for identifying significant patterns in the transformation of value orientations among Kazakhstani youth amidst modern global challenges.

2.2. Boundaries and Validity Considerations

Scope & External Validity. The inference population comprises urban young university students (ages 18–23) enrolled in universities in Almaty and Astana. Findings should not be extrapolated to non-students, other age groups, or rural cohorts. Mitigation: we align measures with WVS-7 and document instruments to support cautious comparability.

Design & Inference. The study is cross-sectional (Oct–Nov 2024) and identifies descriptive patterns and associations rather than causal effects or within-person change over time. Mitigation: we state claims at the appropriate level of inference and indicate directions for longitudinal follow-up.

Measurement & Response. Measures rely on self-reports and may reflect social desirability and salience/availability biases; direct reliability coefficients were not computed. Mitigation: double translation and piloting of WVS-aligned items, trained interviewers, and survey-interview triangulation (n=600 + 20 interviews).

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Results

The analysis revealed distinct patterns in value orientations across four levels: individual, social, institutional, and civic.

Individual (survey indicators, %, n=600)

- Financial stability named as a key goal — 64%.
- Career advancement rated important — 81%.
- Leisure/time autonomy matters — 83%.
- Health is monitored — 65%; 33% report no systematic approach.

Interpretation. Distributions indicate pragmatic self-enhancement: income, career and time autonomy are highly salient alongside attention to health, though routines are uneven (33%). The profile is goal-oriented rather than exclusionary of other domains.

Social (survey indicators, %, n=600)

- Family health/safety prioritized — 97%.
- Intra-family relations — 96%.
- Family material prosperity — 95%.
- Ties with older generations — 91%.
- Religiosity (identity): identify as believers — 78.3% (strict observance 16.7%).

Interpretation. A family-anchored pattern with dense obligations within the household and intergenerational ties; religiosity is common as identity while strict observance is less frequent. Non-family networks are comparatively narrower.

Institutional (survey indicators, %, n=600)

- Trust in “those in power” — ≈25%.
- Trust no public sources — 29.8%.
- Trust in the scientific community — ≈22–23%.
- Trust in political party leaders — 14.2%.
- Trust in bloggers/influencers — 10%.

Interpretation. Confidence in authority and public information sources is restrained, with many defaulting to skepticism; endorsements of institutional ideals are not matched by high reported trust.

Civic (survey indicators, %, n=600)

- Interest in socio-political life — 34%.
- Volunteer work prioritized — 29%.
- “Change the world” as a personal goal — 17%.
- Country’s economic situation prioritized — 89%.
- Do not believe climate change is real — 23.4%.

Interpretation. Civic ideals are widely endorsed but engagement is selective; economic concerns dominate personal agendas. Environmental salience is uneven: while many rate it important, a notable minority (23.4%) deny climate change, helping explain low action.

3.2. Discussion

In light of the data obtained, the value orientations of young university students in our urban sample should be analyzed on four interrelated levels: individual, social, institutional, and civic. Such a multifaceted approach makes it possible to trace how personal priorities are transformed under the influence of one's immediate environment, attitudes toward institutions, and overall civic orientations.

At the individual level, the value orientations of young university students in our sample reflect an intensification of personal aspirations and a high degree of subjective well-being. Survey results show a noticeable shift toward individualism. Nearly two-thirds of respondents strive for financial stability (64%), viewing material prosperity as the foundation of personal and family well-being. Opportunities for self-fulfillment are almost equally significant: career advancement is important for the overwhelming majority (81%), and leisure and free time matter to 83% of those surveyed. At the same time, health remains an absolute priority: 65% of young people monitor their physical condition, although 33% admit they lack a systematic approach to their health. Overall, the value profile at the personal level is characterized by a combination of high aspirations and confidence in the future, accompanied by an awareness of existing constraints. This pragmatic individualism corresponds to theories of value shifts that explain young people's growing pursuit of self-actualization even amid uncertainty. These distributions are consistent with Inglehart's prediction that material security remains salient when existential certainty is limited: in our data, 64% name financial stability as a key goal and 89% prioritize the country's economic situation, while self-expression items are secondary (17% aim to "change the world"; 34% report interest in sociopolitical life; 29% prioritize volunteering). Thus, self enhancement coexists with strong materialist anchors.

Our data indicate a pragmatic individualism anchored in material security rather than a wholesale shift to post materialism: 64% emphasize financial stability, 81% career advancement, and 83%-time autonomy, while explicitly postmaterialist aspirations remain lower (17% aim to "change the world"; 34% express interest in sociopolitical life; 29% prioritize volunteering). This pattern accords with Inglehart's model, which predicts that self-expression values rise only as existential security improves.

The individualistic optimism of Kazakhstan's youth coexists with objective constraints. Such a gap between high aspirations and real opportunities can be examined through the lens of the "value conflict" concept: the discrepancy between an individual's expectations and actual conditions generates internal tension (Thacher & Rein, 2004). In our case, young people who grew up during an era of economic reforms and globalization have internalized ideals of success but encounter obstacles to achieving them. A similar situation characterized the "Nazarbayev generation" in the 2010s: young Kazakhstani citizens, focused on consumption and career growth, experienced frustration due to limited social mobility. Researchers note that institutions' inability to establish conditions for meeting youth's rising expectations became one of the causes of public discontent in the country (Sheryazdanova et al., 2024). Thus, at the individual level, the value profile of the younger generation exhibits duality: on the one hand, there is a strengthening focus on the self (individual achievements, personal well-being, self-expression), while on the other, there remains an understanding of the importance of basic conditions and an awareness of barriers that hinder these aspirations. In our sample, this tension is visible in the intention–action gap: while many endorse health and self-improvement (65% monitor health), 33% lack systematic routines; and although civic ideals are

endorsed in principle, only 34% report interest in sociopolitical life and 29% prioritize volunteering. These discrepancies ground the “value conflict” reading in observed distributions.

At the social level, the values of young students in our urban sample citizens demonstrate the persistence of family-oriented collectivist orientations, although they are undergoing certain changes. Family remains the main value for the vast majority: nearly all respondents rank the well-being of their loved ones as a top priority. Our study showed that 97% of respondents consider the health and safety of their family a priority, 96% emphasize the importance of maintaining intra-family relationships, and 95% specifically note the family’s material prosperity. These indicators confirm that, despite modernization, family ties continue to have fundamental significance. Moreover, 91% of young people highlight the need to maintain close relationships with older generations, indicating the continuity of traditions that honor the family. Our research confirms that family norms serve as a solid guide for youth, providing support in a changing society.

At the same time, shifts have been identified: outside the family, social ties receive more modest recognition. For instance, the importance of friendship and a broad social circle has clearly decreased compared to previous generations. According to comparative data, only about one-third of young people cited friendship as a life priority, whereas in Kazakhstan’s overall population sample, this figure reached around 80% (Haerpfer et al., 2022). This suggests that modern young people are less oriented toward large non-family communities, preferring a smaller circle of close friends and online interactions. Indeed, in their free time, they most often spend time in small groups: the most popular activities are visiting parents (67.8%), communicating on social networks (66.2%), and meeting with friends (49.6%), while cultural events (museums, theaters) and participation in social organizations attract substantially fewer young people. Collectivist values persist primarily in the realm of family and one’s immediate circle, whereas broader social connections have somewhat weakened under the growth of an individualized lifestyle. Young respondents are generally satisfied with their relationships with parents, demonstrating both adherence to a philosophy of family cohesion and an orientation toward stable family ties—much like their parents’ generation.

Young people are less involved in offline socializing outside the family; this trend can be interpreted through the prism of individualization theory: new socioeconomic realities and the “network society” (Castells, 2020) promote a focus on personal projects, sometimes at the expense of traditional informal interaction. Nevertheless, one cannot assert that all forms of collectivism are eroding. One might say that youth synthesize old and new orientations: they retain familial and ethical foundations that foster social cohesion while adapting their lifestyles to the demands of an individualistic era. This synthesis confirms the conclusions of Sh. Schwartz’s theory of values, which holds that in transitional societies, both collectivist (Embeddedness) and autonomous (Autonomy) values can be highly esteemed at the same time (Schwartz, 2006). This overlap mirrors Schwartz’s Embeddedness–Autonomy: family embeddedness is strong (97% family health/safety; 96% intrafamily relations; 95% family prosperity; 91% ties with older generations), while autonomy markers also score high (83%-time autonomy; 81% career). We also see narrower nonfamily circles (friendship as a top priority $\approx$ one third vs $\sim$ 80% in the all population WVS7 comparison cited), and leisure patterns concentrated in small groups (67.8% visiting parents; 66.2% social networks; 49.6% meeting friends).

An important component of the social level of values is the attitude toward traditions and religion. The younger generation shows flexibility in following customs: more than half of respondents are willing to observe family traditions selectively, depending on the situation (55%), and only one-fifth believe customs must be followed unconditionally (19%). Most young people tend to adapt ancestral norms to modern

conditions, which corresponds to findings on the evolution of cultural practices in transitional societies. Religiosity among young people remains relatively high in terms of identity but is more secular in practice. A total of 78.3% identified themselves as believers; however, strict adherence to religious rites is much rarer: only 16.7% strictly follow the prescriptions of their faith, whereas a significant portion (43.6%) confines itself to viewing religion primarily as part of personal identity, without regular participation in services. About 18% visit places of worship sporadically, on special occasions. The family continues to play a key role in transmitting spiritual values: approximately 32% of young people indicated that their parents and relatives had the strongest influence on their religious views. At the same time, tolerance prevails: the majority of young Kazakhstani citizens are at ease with members of other faiths and beliefs, regarding religion as a personal choice. This pattern operationalizes “believing without belonging”: 78.3% self-identify as believers, yet strict observance is 16.7% and irregular attendance ~18%; 43.6% treat religion primarily as identity and 32% cite family as the main source of transmission.

On the institutional dimension of religion, the focus for youth recedes, giving way to a personal search for meaning. This creates new challenges for state and religious institutions. To remain relevant to the new generation, they must restructure their approaches, becoming more flexible and accounting for the individualized spiritual needs of youth. State confessional policy, in particular, should recognize that young people are growing less receptive to directive forms of religious education and tend to define their faith independently.

At the institutional level, young people’s value orientations appear in a critical view of official institutions, coupled with an ongoing intent to improve them rather than abandon them. Our study revealed a high level of skepticism: a significant share of young Kazakhstani citizens do not trust the main social institutions or sources of information. Notably, almost one-third of respondents do not trust any public sources at all (29.8%), indicating a lack of reliable authorities. Government agencies enjoy the trust of only a minority of young students—for instance, only around one-quarter of respondents trust those in power (~25%). A similar level of trust—approximately 22–23%—is shown toward the scientific community, which indicates an acknowledgement of knowledge’s role but also reveals that science holds a relatively moderate level of authority among youth. We observe that roughly 20% of respondents trust well-known public figures, only 14.2% trust political party leaders, and 13.7% trust doctors. Even new media personalities receive limited trust from youth: bloggers and internet influencers are trusted by only 10% of young respondents. The prevailing sentiment is pervasive distrust of institutions and official information, creating the risk of a widening gap between youth and authorities. According to WVS data (Haerpfer et al., 2022), Kazakhstani society at large also exhibits low interpersonal trust—about 72% believe one must be very cautious in dealing with people. Nevertheless, young people show even lower trust in traditional institutions than the general population: for example, the proportion of young people who trust the government is roughly one-third the figure reported nationwide (~25% versus ~68%).

Still, by criticizing institutions, young people do not completely reject them. On the contrary, most aim to operate through legitimate structures and channels, suggesting a form of civic maturity. A significant portion of respondents express a willingness to participate in formal politics—joining youth organizations, political parties, and NGOs—viewing these institutions as tools for influencing the country’s direction. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of young people approve of participating in lawfully permitted rallies and demonstrations, considering them a valid way to articulate their position. According to comparative assessments, youth are more inclined than older generations (Haerpfer et al., 2022) to engage in peaceful protest about issues that matter to them. Our interpretation is that higher levels of education and awareness encourage young citizens to seek evolutionary means of achieving change—dialogue with the authorities—rather than radical methods. This tendency helps explain why surges of dissatisfaction typically do not lead

youth to a wholesale rejection of the state system. Instead, the younger generation's stance on institutions can be reduced to a demand for transparency, efficiency, and the inclusion of youth interests, while maintaining loyalty to the basic foundations of the state structure.

Students in our urban sample prioritize material security and career progress alongside time autonomy, while family obligations remain strong. This configuration is typical for cohorts at the start of the life course in middle-income settings: self-enhancement goals are salient, whereas post-material concerns are secondary. On the institutional dimension, ideals of transparency and fairness are widely endorsed, yet reported trust in concrete actors and information sources is restrained, with a notable minority defaulting to skepticism. We interpret this pattern as "critical loyalty": a preference to see institutions work better rather than to disengage from them.

Civically, respondents support lawful avenues of participation and community responsibility, but engagement is selective; interest, volunteering, and world-changing aspirations trail economic priorities. The intention–action gap likely reflects perceived efficacy and opportunity costs as well as limited proximate entry points. For higher education, tractable levers sit close to students: transparent student governance, credit-bearing service-learning, and structured school-to-work bridges. Small, solvable sustainability micro-projects embedded in coursework can raise environmental salience without competing with near-term economic concerns.

By design, our discussion keeps to the general context and avoids regime labels or political chronologies. The aim is to describe value distributions and their practical implications for universities. Future work should widen geographic and age coverage and track cohorts over time to observe how institutional trust and civic engagement evolve with changing economic and policy environments. For general background on institutional legitimacy and youth civic engagement in Kazakhstan, see Lipset (1994); Haerpfer et al. (2022); Zhelnina (2020); and analyses of protest culture and legitimacy adjustments (Kudaibergenova & Laruelle, 2022).

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Environmental values currently occupy a contradictory position in young people's consciousness. On the one hand, the overwhelming majority of respondents assert the importance of ecological well-being—about 90% consider the state of the environment to be significant. On the other hand, environmental concerns clearly take a back seat to pressing economic interests: many do not possess extensive ecological awareness, and nearly one-quarter of youth do not believe in the reality of climate change at all (23.4%). In sum, environmental well-being is valued in principle, but its issue salience remains low for many students. Our findings suggest that, in a context of uncertainty and limited resources, young people tend to postpone postmaterialist values (such as combating climate change) to the future, focusing on more immediate development goals. This situation accords with theoretical models proposing that fulfilling basic needs precedes the emergence of a sustained interest in global issues (Inglehart, 2000; 2018). Hence, there is a need to intensify environmental education and involve youth in sustainable development projects to raise the salience of these values.

Kazakhstan is a country with a transitional economy, where a large proportion of young people are still addressing fundamental career and financial objectives; thus, it is unsurprising that the environmental agenda is perceived as secondary or abstract. This can partly be attributed to a lack of sufficient information: environmental education is in its early stages, and many simply do not grasp the scale of the threat. At present, sustainable development values among youth remain largely rhetorical. Nonetheless, there is clearly potential for strengthening them. Our research underscores the necessity of enhancing environmental awareness and training among young people, engaging them in specific initiatives (for example, volunteer environmental projects), and integrating sustainable development principles into educational programs. According to value-change theory, as prosperity and literacy rise, environmental consciousness among younger generations will increase (Gifford & Nilsson, 2014). Consequently, laying the foundations of environmental culture now may expedite young people's shift toward postmaterialist values in the future.

Family centric items score 97/96/95/91%, while autonomy markers remain high (83%-time autonomy; 81% career); institutional trust is restrained ($\approx$ 25% trust those in power; 29.8% trust no public sources), and civic engagement is selective (34% interest; 29% volunteering; 17% "change the world"). At the individual level, the younger generation is moving toward self-expression and autonomy, although material constraints still firmly anchor them to more "earthly" priorities. At the social level, we see robust family norms and morality, tempered by the influence of individualized behaviors. The institutional values of youth reflect a critical reassessment of relationships with the state and religion: in demanding efficiency and integrity from institutions, young people simultaneously display a willingness to support them if they meet their expectations, while shifting spirituality into the personal sphere. Finally, at the civic level, youth values balance the desire for stability with a readiness to engage in change—this balance fosters a responsible civic stance, which is crucial for the country's future.

All the identified trends largely accord with R. Inglehart's general theory of value shifts, yet they also highlight the specificity of the Kazakhstani context. The economic and political transitions taking place in society lead youth values to evolve in multiple directions rather than linearly: pockets of traditionalism (family, basic religiosity) persist, shifts toward individualism (self-fulfillment, careerism) emerge, and the first stirrings of post materialism (demands for rights, environmental awareness among an active minority) begin to appear. This complex picture indicates the hybrid nature of the value consciousness of generations born in independent Kazakhstan. Youth are adopting new ideals without wholly discarding older ones, developing their own standards for evaluating social phenomena. For both theory and practice, this outcome

implies the necessity of a more nuanced approach—one that accounts for structural factors (e.g., economy, institutions) and cultural heritage alike when analyzing and formulating higher education policy and student support. The Kazakhstani example confirms that value modernization is context-dependent: global trends (individualization, secularization, post materialism) are refracted through the prism of local conditions. Forward looking aims (64% financial stability; 81% career; 83%-time autonomy) coexist with strong family anchors (97/96/95/91%), yielding a stable profile amid low institutional trust ($\approx 25\%$; 29.8% none) and selective civic engagement (34/29/17). Taken together, our data and literature indicate that as young people integrate new values into their lives, they simultaneously preserve their cultural identity, thereby laying a foundation for constructive societal development.

These limitations suggest several avenues for future research. First, the sample should be expanded to include a broader spectrum of youth. Incorporating participants of different ages (beyond university students), from diverse social backgrounds, and from various regions of Kazakhstan would provide a more representative picture of young people's value orientations. Second, comparative studies could offer additional insights. This includes research comparing value trends across different regions within Kazakhstan, as well as cross-cultural comparisons between Kazakhstani youth and their peers in other countries (particularly in other post-Soviet or developing nations). Such comparative analysis would help distinguish the unique patterns of value change in Kazakhstan from more universal trends driven by globalization.

Finally, a longitudinal approach would be especially valuable for understanding how youth values evolve over time. By tracking the same cohort of young people through long-term panel studies or repeated surveys (for example, in future waves of the World Values Survey or similar national studies), researchers could observe how their attitudes shift as they grow older and as the social context changes. This approach would yield deeper insights into the causal factors driving value transformations and enable more accurate predictions of future value trends. Taken together, the pattern matches Schwartz's coexistence of Embeddedness (family centric items: 97/96/95/91%) and Autonomy (83%-time autonomy; 81% career). Consistent with Inglehart, materialist anchors remain strong (64% financial stability; 89% economic situation), while self-expression tracks lower (34% interest; 29% volunteering; 17% "change the world").

4. Conclusions

This study maps value orientations among urban university students (18–23) in Almaty and Astana using a WVS aligned survey ($n = 600$) and 20 interviews collected in Oct–Nov 2024. The design captures four interlinked layers—individual, social, institutional, civic—and shows a patterned mix of continuity and change. Our conclusions rest on observed distributions rather than general claims.

Individual. Students display pragmatic individualism anchored in self-enhancement. Financial stability (64%) and career advancement (81%) feature prominently; time/leisure autonomy matters to 83%. Health is widely valued (65%), albeit with uneven routines (33% report no systematic approach). These priorities reflect the constraints of early life course stages in a transitional economy and help explain why post material concerns remain secondary for many.

Social. Family solidarity is robust: 97% prioritize relatives' health/safety, 96% intrafamily relations, 95% material prosperity of the family, and 91% emphasize ties with older generations. Beyond the family, social circles are narrower, with interaction often concentrated in small, trusted groups. This pattern indicates that collectivist commitments persist primarily in the familial domain alongside growing individual autonomy.

Institutional. Normative support for transparency and fairness coexists with restrained trust in real institutions. Only about a quarter report trust in those in power, and 29.8% indicate they trust no public sources, signaling a credibility gap that channels reliance toward personal networks. Yet the stance is best described as critical loyalty: respondents wish institutions to work and prefer reform over rupture.

Civic. Civic ideals—responsibility, lawful protest, community welfare—receive broad assent, but participation is selective: 34% express interest in sociopolitical life and 29% report volunteering. Many doubt efficacy or lack clear entry points, producing a familiar intention–action gap. Environmental concern is endorsed in principle, yet 23.4% do not believe climate change is real; overall salience remains low relative to immediate economic issues.

Implications (higher education and student services). Because patterns are concentrated in the student sphere, actionable implications sit with HEIs rather than national youth policy. Universities can:

Institutionalize civic learning via credit bearing service learning, support for student led associations, and codesigned, authorized projects with local authorities (clear rules, small budgets, measurable outputs).

Smooth schoolwork transitions through career mentoring, internships, and basic financial literacy modules aligned with the observed primacy of economic security.

Rebuild trust through proximity: transparent student governance channels (participatory budgeting at department level; student seats on academic boards) to make institutional fairness visible.

Raise environmental salience using microprojects (waste audits, campus energy dashboards) embedded in coursework—small, solvable tasks tend to convert concern into action more reliably than generic appeals.

Limitations and future work. Inference is restricted to urban students (18–23) in two cities and to a single cross section. Next steps include (i) regional and rural extensions; (ii) age span widening beyond students; (iii) longitudinal follow up to track cohort shifts; and (iv) targeted experiments on reducing the intention–action gap (e.g., low-cost commitment devices for volunteering). Publishing the adapted instrument and coding scheme as an online appendix will aid comparability and reuse.

In short, contemporary student values combine family centered continuity with pragmatic individualism and reform minded, critically loyal institutional views. The actionable frontier lies in university policy: where institutions are close, legible, and responsive, civic ideals more readily translate into practice.

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