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**PRESIDENTIAL YOUTH
PERSONNEL RESERVE OF
KAZAKHSTAN: EVOLUTION AND
PROSPECTS FOR MERITOCRATIC
PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

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Abstract. Drawing on administrative microdata and official reports, the article presents the first comprehensive evaluation study of Kazakhstan's Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve as an instrument of meritocratic renewal within the post-Soviet public administration system. It analyzes the demographic composition, multi-stage selection procedures, and career outcomes of three cohorts (2019, 2021, 2023) comprising 400 participants. Descriptive statistics indicate a significant increase in competitiveness, while gender and regional disparities persist. Logistic regression demonstrates that foreign education and prior managerial experience substantially increase the likelihood of appointments to central government bodies. A comparative analysis with international programs (Fast Stream, Presidential Management Fellows, Administrative Service Singapore) reveals a high level of competitiveness within the PYPR alongside limitations in mentoring and rotational mechanisms. The SWOT analysis highlights the program's strengths while identifying risks related to

a narrowing selection funnel and decreasing inclusivity. The recommendations aim to enhance regional representation, gender-sensitive recruitment, structured mentorship, and transparency of career pathways.

It should be specifically emphasized that the scientific work was carried out independently by the author. Artificial intelligence was not used in preparing the main text, analyzing data, or generating conclusions. In accordance with paragraphs 5 and 5-2 of the Rules for the Awarding of Degrees, AI technologies were used solely for minor technical language corrections, which do not affect the scientific content or authorship.

Keywords. *Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve; meritocratic recruitment; Kazakhstan civil service; talent pipeline; public administration reform.*

ҚАЗАҚСТАННЫҢ ПРЕЗИДЕНТТІК ЖАСТАР КАДР РЕЗЕРВІ: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯСЫ ЖӘНЕ МЕРИТОКРАТИЯЛЫҚ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК БАСҚАРУДЫҢ БОЛАШАҒЫ

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Аңдатпа. Әкімшілік микродеректер мен ресми есептерге сүйене отырып, бұл мақала Қазақстанның Президенттік жастар кадр резервін посткеңестік мемлекеттік басқару жүйесін меритократиялық жаңғырту құралы ретінде жан-жақты бағалайтын алғашқы зерттеу болып табылады. Зерттеу барысында үш іріктеу кезеңінің (2019, 2021, 2023 жж.) демографиялық құрамы, көпсатылы бағалау рәсімдері және 400 қатысушының карьерлік нәтижелері талданады. Сипаттамалық статистика конкурс деңгейінің айтарлықтай артқанын көрсеткенімен, гендерлік және өңірлік теңсіздіктер сақталуда. Логистикалық регрессия шетелдік білім мен басқарушылық тәжірибенің орталық мемлекеттік органдарға тағайындалу ықтималдығын едәуір арттыратынын айқындайды. Fast Stream, Presidential Management Fellows және Administrative Service Singapore сияқты халықаралық бағдарламалармен салыстырмалы талдау ПЖКР-дың жоғары бәсекелестік деңгейін растайды, бірақ менторлық пен ротациялық механизмдердің жеткіліксіздігін көрсетеді. SWOT-талдау бағдарламаның күшті жақтарын айқындап, «воронканың» тарылуы мен инклюзивтіліктің төмендеуі сияқты тәуекелдерге назар аудара-

ды. Ұсыныстар өңірлік қамтуды кеңейтуге, гендерге сезімтал рекрутингті дамытуға, құрылымдалған менторлықты нығайтуға және мансаптық траекториялардың ашықтығын арттыруға бағытталған.

Ғылыми жұмыстың автор тарапынан толықтай дербес орындалғанын ерекше атап өткен жөн. Жасанды интеллект негізгі мәтінді дайындау, деректерді талдау немесе қорытынды жасау үшін қолданылған жоқ. Диссертациялық жұмыстарға қойылатын талаптардың 5 және 5-2-тармақтарына сәйкес, ЖИ технологиялары тек техникалық тілдік түзетулер үшін ғана қолданылды, бұл ғылыми мазмұнға және авторлыққа әсер етпейді.

***Түйін сөздер:** Президенттік жастар кадр резерві; меритократиялық іріктеу; Қазақстан мемлекеттік қызметі; кадрлық лифт; мемлекеттік басқару реформасы.*

ПРЕЗИДЕНТСКИЙ МОЛОДЕЖНЫЙ КАДРОВЫЙ РЕЗЕРВ КАЗАХСТАНА: ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ МЕРИТОКРАТИЧЕСКОГО ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОГО УПРАВЛЕНИЯ

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Аннотация. Опираясь на административные микроданные и официальные отчёты, статья представляет первое комплексное оценочное исследование Президентского молодежного кадрового резерва Казахстана как инструмента меритократического обновления постсоветской системы государственного управления. Анализируются демографический состав, многоэтапные процедуры отбора и карьерные результаты трёх наборов (2019, 2021, 2023), охватывающих 400 участников. Описательная статистика фиксирует значительный рост конкурентности, при этом сохраняются гендерные и региональные дисбалансы. Логистическая регрессия показывает, что иностранное образование и предыдущий управленческий опыт существенно повышают вероятность назначения в центральные органы. Сравнительный анализ с международными программами (Fast Stream, Presidential Management Fellows, Administrative Service Singapore) выявляет высокий уровень конкурентности ПМКР при недостатке менторских и ротационных механизмов. SWOT-анализ подчёркивает сильные стороны программы, но указывает на

риски, связанные с сужением «воронки» и снижением инклюзивности. Представленные рекомендации ориентированы на усиление регионального охвата, гендерно-чувствительного рекрутинга, структурированного наставничества и прозрачных карьерных траекторий.

Отдельно следует подчеркнуть, что научная работа выполнена автором самостоятельно. Искусственный интеллект не применялся для подготовки основного текста, анализа данных или выводов. В соответствии с п. 5 и п. 5-2 Правил присуждения степеней ИИ использовался исключительно для технических языковых корректур, что не оказывает влияния на научное содержание и авторство.

Ключевые слова: Президентский молодежный кадровый резерв (ПМКР); меритократический отбор; государственная служба Казахстана; кадровый лифт; реформа государственного управления.

Introduction

In the contemporary context of global administrative reforms and increasing demands for public sector efficiency, the systematic development of human resources in public administration has emerged as a pivotal component of institutional modernization. The pursuit of meritocracy, transparency, and evidence-based talent management has become a hallmark of governance reforms across developed and emerging economies alike [1, 2]. Within this paradigm, the Republic of Kazakhstan has launched a unique initiative—the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve (PYPR)—designed to establish a transparent social elevator for talented young professionals aspiring to contribute to public service at the highest levels.

Since its inception in 2019, the PYPR has undergone substantial evolution in scope, procedural design, and strategic focus. Initially conceived as a large-scale program to attract up to 300 candidates for leadership positions in government and quasi-governmental organizations, the Reserve has transformed into a more selective, specialized mechanism prioritizing the development of narrowly profiled sectoral leaders. This trajectory mirrors international best practices such as the Fast Stream in the United Kingdom, the Presidential Management Fellows (PMF) program in the United States, and the Administrative Service Scheme in Singapore, while also reflecting the unique institutional and socio-political context of Kazakhstan.

Despite its prominence in public discourse, the scholarly examination of the PYPR remains limited. Existing literature on public sector human resource management in emerging economies [3, 4, 5] highlights the importance of analyzing talent identification mechanisms not only as technical recruitment tools but also as instruments of legitimacy, professionalization, and social mobility. From this perspective, the PYPR represents a compelling case for investigating how meritocratic principles are operationalized within a post-Soviet administrative system and what implications such mechanisms have for public sector modernization.

This article contributes to the literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of the PYPR's evolution, demographic composition, selection processes, and career outcomes of its participants over three waves of implementation (2019, 2021, and 2023).

In addressing these questions, the study seeks to advance both the theoretical

understanding and practical discourse on meritocracy, public sector talent pipelines, and institutional reforms in transitional economies.

In doing so, it offers a rare empirical examination of an understudied region—Central Asia—and contextualizes Kazakhstan's experience within global debates on administrative modernization.

Contribution to Theory and Practice

This study advances scholarship on public-sector talent pipelines in transitional economies in four ways. First, it integrates meritocratic theory, social-mobility frameworks, and Public Service Motivation into a single analytical lens, offering a theoretically grounded model for evaluating elite-selection programs. Second, by analysing three PYPR cohorts (2019, 2021, 2023) with original administrative micro-data, it provides one of the first longitudinal examinations of Kazakhstan's civil-service talent pipeline. Third, comparative benchmarking against flagship international programmes (Fast Stream, PMF, Administrative Service) refines existing typologies of state-sponsored talent management. Fourth, the findings generate actionable recommendations—mentorship structures, regional outreach, and gender-sensitive recruitment—that help practitioners balance meritocratic selectivity with social equity.

2 Literature Review

The emergence of talent management systems in public administration has been extensively discussed in the literature as a response to the evolving expectations of citizens, the increasing complexity of governance, and the intensification of competition for qualified human capital [3, 5, 6]. This section critically examines the theoretical frameworks and empirical studies that inform the analysis of the PYPR, with a focus on three interrelated concepts: meritocracy, social mobility (social elevators), and PSM.

2.1 Meritocracy as an Organizing Principle

The notion of meritocracy has evolved from Michael Young's [7] original satirical critique into a normative principle that underpins modern bureaucracies. Meritocracy entails that access to public sector positions and career advancement should be determined primarily by demonstrated competencies, qualifications, and performance, rather than personal networks, patronage, or arbitrary criteria [8, 9].

Weber's [10] theory of rational-legal authority provides the foundational justification for meritocratic recruitment, arguing that bureaucratic efficiency depends on systematic selection processes that favor objective assessments over ascriptive characteristics. Subsequent scholarship [11, 12] has demonstrated that merit-based systems contribute to higher organizational performance, citizen trust, and administrative legitimacy.

In transitional economies, including post-Soviet states, implementing meritocracy has been both a priority and a challenge. Researchers have identified persistent risks of «informal networks», nepotism, and limited transparency in selection processes [6, 13]. The PYPR can thus be seen as an institutional experiment to strengthen meritocratic foundations in Kazakhstan's civil service.

2.2 Social Mobility and Talent Pipelines

The concept of social mobility, or the capacity of individuals to ascend to higher

social or professional strata, is closely linked to the idea of «social elevators». Sorokin [14] distinguished between vertical and horizontal mobility, noting that state institutions often act as gatekeepers of vertical advancement.

In public administration, talent pipelines such as fast-track programs and leadership reserves serve dual purposes: they professionalize the bureaucratic corps and signal inclusiveness and opportunity [15, 16]. The OECD [1] has emphasized that transparent selection mechanisms can reduce perceptions of elitism and enhance the attractiveness of public service careers.

Studies on international programs provide relevant insights:

Fast Stream (UK): Established to attract graduates into a career trajectory involving structured rotations and rapid promotion. Evaluations highlight high competition, rigorous competency assessments, and strong career development support [5].

PMF (US): A prestigious two-year program designed to prepare graduates for leadership roles. While it emphasizes merit-based selection, researchers note challenges related to limited positions and inconsistent mentorship [3].

Administrative Service Scheme (Singapore): A model characterized by early identification of talent, strong investment in overseas education, and a culture of performance-driven progression. Scholars often cite it as an exemplar of integrated talent management [6].

Leaders of Russia (Russia): A competition combining assessment centers, mentorship, and public visibility. Though widely publicized, it has been critiqued for potential politicization and opacity [17].

Comparing these models suggests that the effectiveness of a talent reserve depends not only on selection mechanisms but also on structured career support, transparent communication, and alignment with broader public administration reforms.

However, the existing literature provides limited empirical scrutiny of how such programs function in non-Western and post-Soviet environments. While prior research highlights the normative appeal of meritocratic recruitment, there is a lack of evidence regarding the long-term implications for diversity, organizational performance, and social legitimacy. This gap underscores the relevance of studying the PYPR in Kazakhstan as a distinctive institutional experiment.

2.3 Public Service Motivation

PSM refers to the intrinsic motivation individuals experience when pursuing goals aligned with public interest, social equity, and civic duty [11]. PSM has been shown to correlate with higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance [6, 13, 18].

Recent research has stressed the importance of infusing PSM throughout the talent management cycle, from recruitment messaging to performance evaluation [5, 6]. For example, job advertisements emphasizing public value attract candidates with higher PSM, improving retention and engagement [19].

In the case of the PYPR, public narratives often position the program as a patriotic duty and a vehicle for contributing to the nation's development. However, there is limited empirical evidence on whether these narratives translate into sustained PSM among participants, highlighting an area for further inquiry.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

While extensive scholarship exists on meritocracy and talent pipelines in Western contexts, studies focusing on post-Soviet and Central Asian countries remain sparse. Notably, the intersection of: rigorous selection mechanisms, social mobility narratives, and long-term career trajectories has not been systematically examined in Kazakhstan.

Most available analyses are either descriptive reports or policy documents lacking in theoretical framing and critical evaluation.

Moreover, there is a paucity of research exploring how demographic factors (gender, region of origin, prior sector experience) influence selection outcomes and subsequent promotions in such programs. The PYPR thus offers a unique empirical context to contribute to the literature on merit-based recruitment, PSM, and public sector modernization in transitional economies.

2.5 Contribution of This Study

This article addresses the identified gaps by:

- Providing a longitudinal analysis of PYPR demographics, selection processes, and career trajectories over three cohorts.
- Situating the findings within global debates on meritocracy and public service attractiveness.
- Offering a critical evaluation of program effectiveness through a SWOT framework.

Advancing recommendations for policy and practice that can inform not only Kazakhstan but also other countries exploring similar initiatives.

2.6 Conceptual Framework

Building on the preceding literature, this study proposes a conceptual framework that integrates three interrelated theoretical domains: meritocracy, social mobility, and PSM. The framework aims to elucidate the mechanisms through which the design and implementation of the PYPR are expected to influence selection outcomes, career trajectories, and organizational performance.

Meritocracy serves as the primary organizing principle, positing that systematic, competency-based recruitment increases the legitimacy and effectiveness of public institutions [9, 11]. Rigorous selection processes are theorized to produce higher-quality entrants whose skills and motivation align with the strategic needs of the public sector.

Social Mobility is conceptualized here as both an outcome and a legitimizing narrative. By providing transparent pathways for young professionals to access elite administrative positions, talent pipelines such as the PYPR function as «social elevators», potentially reducing perceptions of entrenched privilege [14, 15]. However, research also cautions that without accompanying inclusivity measures, such programs may inadvertently reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities [19].

PSM is posited as a mediating factor shaping the long-term impact of selection programs. High levels of PSM among candidates are expected to correlate positively with organizational commitment, retention, and performance outcomes [6]. Conversely, if selection processes overly prioritize formal credentials without attention to intrinsic motivation, the benefits of meritocracy may be diluted over time.

Based on this integrated framework, the study examines the following relationships:

- Selection Inputs: Demographic characteristics, educational background, and professional experience.
- Mediators: PSM levels and perceptions of procedural fairness.
- Outcomes: Appointment rates, promotion trajectories, and retention.
- Contextual Factors: Regional disparities, gender imbalances, and institutional capacity for mentorship.

3 Methodology

This study adopts an explanatory mixed-methods design that combines quantitative statistical analysis with qualitative comparative and interpretive techniques. On the quantitative side, administrative micro-data on all 400 PYPR participants are used to construct individual-level indicators of socio-demographic background, human capital, and career outcomes. These data are analysed through descriptive statistics, bivariate association tests, and logistic regression models. On the qualitative side, documentary analysis of legal acts, official reports, and programme descriptions is employed to reconstruct the institutional evolution of the PYPR and to benchmark it against comparable international talent pipelines.

The overall methodological strategy is to (1) establish empirical patterns in the composition and outcomes of the three PYPR cohorts, (2) relate these patterns to changes in programme design and broader civil-service reforms, and (3) assess the extent to which the observed evidence supports or challenges theoretical expectations derived from meritocracy, social-mobility, and Public Service Motivation (PSM) frameworks.

3.1 Data Sources

The empirical analysis relies on a comprehensive dataset that combines publicly available documentation with confidential administrative micro-data. Three main categories of sources were used.

Official statistical and analytical reports. The National Reports on the State of the Civil Service in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2020–2024 provide aggregate information on civil-service demographics, gender composition, regional distribution, and overall staffing trends. These reports are used primarily as a contextual benchmark for comparing PYPR participants with the broader civil-service workforce.

Legal and institutional documents. The Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 141 of 27 August 2019 «On Certain Issues of the Presidential Youth Personnel Reserve» and subsequent by-laws define the legal status, eligibility criteria, and selection procedures of the PYPR. These sources are systematically reviewed to identify major design changes across cohorts (e.g., cohort size, age limits, competence profiles).

Administrative micro-data on PYPR participants. The core dataset consists of anonymised individual-level records for all 400 participants selected in the 2019, 2021, and 2023 cohorts. The data were formally requested via the eOtinish portal and officially provided by the Agency for Civil Service Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan; the request was registered and processed in early 2025, and the final validated files were delivered on 7 March 2025. The database includes variables on

socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, region of origin), education (highest degree, foreign-education status, field of study), professional experience (years of work, sector of origin), and post-selection career outcomes (appointment status, level of position, number of promotions).

3.2 Units of Analysis

To capture the multilayered character of the PYPR and align the evidence with the study's research questions (RQ 1–5) and hypotheses (H 1–H 3), three nested units of analysis are employed:

- Individual level (micro). Each of the 400 participants selected across the 2019, 2021, and 2023 cohorts constitutes one case. Variables measured include socio-demographics (age, gender, region of origin), human-capital indicators (highest degree, foreign-education status, years of professional experience), and career outcomes (appointment status, number of promotions). This level allows direct testing of gender and education effects on appointment probability (H2–H3) through chi-square tests and logistic regression.
- Cohort level (meso). For every wave, aggregate profiles—mean age, gender proportion, regional-diversity indices, competition ratios, and other descriptive statistics—are computed. Cross-cohort comparison of these composites illuminates temporal trends in selectivity and inclusivity, furnishing evidence for H1 and addressing RQ 1.
- Program-level (macro). System-wide metrics such as total applicant volume, conversion and attrition rates, and procedural design changes provide a panoramic lens on the PYPR's overall effectiveness. These indicators feed into the SWOT framework and international benchmarking that answer RQ 3–4.

Analyzing the PYPR concurrently at micro, meso, and macro scales ensures that individual career trajectories are interpreted in light of their cohort context and the evolving institutional environment, thereby reducing ecological fallacy and strengthening internal validity.

3.3 Analytical Procedures

The research process comprised four main stages:

3.3.1 Descriptive Statistics

Quantitative data were aggregated and summarized to establish baseline trends across three waves of the PYPR. The following descriptive measures were computed:

Competition Ratio: Total number of applicants divided by the number of available slots.

Mean and Median Age: To assess the degree of generational renewal.

Gender Proportions: Share of female participants and appointed candidates.

Regional Distribution: Proportion of participants originating from major urban centers versus other regions.

Educational Background: Share of graduates from foreign universities, holders of advanced degrees.

Professional Experience: Average years of prior work, sectoral origins (public, quasi-governmental, private).

Appointment and Promotion Rates: Share of participants receiving appointments and subsequent promotions.

All statistical calculations were conducted in Microsoft Excel and R.

3.3.2 Comparative Analysis

International benchmarking was performed to situate the PYPR within the broader landscape of global talent management programs. For each comparative program (Fast Stream, PMF, Administrative Service), the following parameters were evaluated:

- Eligibility criteria.
- Competition ratios.
- Selection mechanisms.
- Career support systems (e.g., mentorship, rotations).
- Measured outcomes.

This approach provided a reference framework to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the PYPR.

3.3.3 SWOT Analysis

A qualitative SWOT analysis was undertaken to synthesize insights from the descriptive and comparative analyses. The four dimensions examined were:

- Strengths: Attributes of the PYPR that enhance its effectiveness (e.g., digitalization of processes).
- Weaknesses: Internal limitations (e.g., regional imbalances, lack of systematic mentorship).
- Opportunities: External factors that could be leveraged (e.g., creation of political leadership reserves).
- Threats: Risks that could undermine the sustainability of the program (e.g., demotivation, attrition).

3.3.4 Hypothesis Development

Based on patterns observed in the data, the study formulated and examined the following hypotheses:

H1: The reduction in cohort size over time is associated with a strategic shift towards higher specialization and increased selectivity.

H2: Participants with foreign educational backgrounds are more likely to receive appointments within central government bodies.

H3: Female candidates are underrepresented among appointments despite higher educational attainment.

In addition to descriptive statistics, exploratory bivariate analyses were conducted to identify potential associations between demographic characteristics (e.g., gender, educational background) and appointment outcomes. Chi-square tests and correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength and significance of observed relationships.

To complement descriptive and bivariate analyses, a parsimonious binary logistic regression model was estimated to assess the probability of appointment to a governmental position as a function of gender, foreign educational background, and prior work experience. These three predictors were selected because they are consistently available across all cohorts and correspond directly to the study's hypotheses H2–H3.

It should be noted that the model does not explicitly control for a range of potentially relevant factors, such as detailed sectoral specialisations, the prestige or quality of specific universities, micro-level organisational characteristics, or

informal professional networks. In several cases, the relevant variables were either absent from the administrative dataset or recorded too inconsistently to be used in multivariate analysis without risking overfitting. As a result, the estimated coefficients should be interpreted as capturing broad associations rather than the isolated causal impact of any single characteristic. Coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels were computed to evaluate the strength of associations, and summary results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Logistic Regression Predicting Appointment Probability

Variable	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	Wald χ^2	p-value	Odds Ratio
Gender (Female=1)	-0.56	0.21	7.11	0.008	0.57
Foreign Education (Yes=1)	+0.73	0.19	14.68	<0.001	2.07
Work Experience (years)	+0.04	0.02	3.84	0.050	1.04
Constant	-1.21	0.33	13.44	<0.001	—

Note: N = 400; Nagelkerke R² = 0.21

These hypotheses are explored in Section 4.

3.4 Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged:

- **Data Completeness:** While administrative records provide comprehensive coverage, certain variables (e.g., detailed performance evaluations, motivational profiles) were not consistently available.
- **Potential Reporting Bias:** Official reports may emphasize positive outcomes, potentially underreporting attrition or dissatisfaction.
- **Causality:** As this is primarily a descriptive and correlational study, causal inferences must be interpreted cautiously.
- Despite these limitations, the methodological design is robust in capturing key trends and enabling informed interpretation.

4 Results

This section presents the empirical findings derived from the descriptive and comparative analysis of the PYPR across three cohorts (2019, 2021, and 2023). The results are structured into six subsections: applicant pool characteristics, selection dynamics, demographic profiles, educational and professional backgrounds, appointment outcomes, and preliminary hypothesis testing.

4.1 Applicant Pool and Competition Dynamics

As shown in Table 2, the program demonstrated significant variations in applicant volume and competition ratios across the three waves.

Table 2. Applicant Volume and Competition Ratios

Cohort Year	Applications Submitted	Eligible Candidates	Selected Candidates	Competition Ratio*
2019	13 000	7 312	300	24.3
2021	22 000	8 638	50	172.7

2023	30 000	6 404	50	128.0
<i>*Competition Ratio: Eligible Candidates / Selected Candidates</i>				

Observations: The absolute number of applications increased more than twofold between 2019 and 2023, demonstrating growing interest.

The most selective cohort was 2021, with a competition ratio exceeding 170.

The sharp reduction in selected candidates (from 300 to 50) reflects a policy shift towards narrower specialization and stricter selection criteria.

4.2 Demographic Profiles

4.2.1 Age Distribution

As presented in Table 3, the mean participant age remained remarkably consistent across all cohorts.

Table 3. Average Age of Selected Candidates

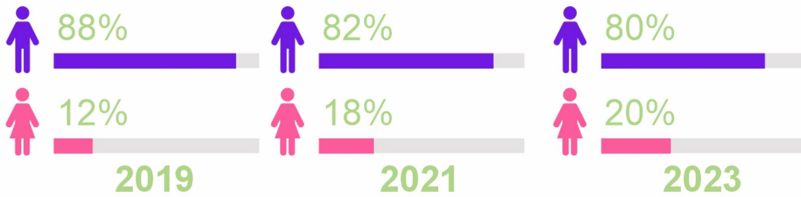
Cohort Year	Mean Age (Years)
2019	31.0
2021	31.3
2023	31.0

Interpretation: The consistency of mean age suggests a sustained emphasis on mid-career professionals rather than early-career entrants.

4.2.2 Gender Composition

The proportion of female participants increased over time, although women remained significantly underrepresented relative to their share in the civil service workforce, which was 55.8% in 2024 according to the National Report on the Civil Service of Kazakhstan (2025), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Gender Distribution Across Cohorts (2019–2023)



Observations: Although female participation has gradually increased across cohorts, the persistent gap indicates that structural and institutional barriers continue to limit women’s access to the PYPR.

4.2.3 Regional Origin

A substantial concentration of candidates emerged from major urban and industrial centers, as shown in Table 5. In the 2019 cohort, Almaty City, Karaganda

Region, and East Kazakhstan Region together accounted for a significant share of all selected participants. Over time, this pattern remained largely stable: central and eastern regions consistently contributed the majority of candidates, while participation from many western and northern areas declined markedly after 2019. In particular, Aktobe Region, which previously had relatively high representation, recorded only a single candidate in 2021 and none in 2023. Conversely, some regions that had minimal or no representation in earlier cohorts began to appear in later selections, reflecting gradual expansion of outreach and awareness. The proportion of candidates residing abroad also decreased over time, from 11 in 2019 to none in 2023.

Table 5. Regional Distribution

Region	2019 (n=300)	2021 (n=50)	2023 (n=50)
Almaty City	49	3	7
Astana City	9	2	2
Shymkent City	5	2	1
Abai region	0	1	3
Akmola region	14	3	3
Aktobe region	18	1	0
Almaty region	14	1	2
Atyrau region	6	0	0
East Kazakhstan region	29	4	5
Zhambyl region	24	3	3
Zhetysu region	0	0	1
West Kazakhstan region	6	2	2
Karaganda region	41	4	5
Kostanay region	11	8	5
Kyzylorda region	11	2	0
Mangystau region	7	0	1
Pavlodar region	16	8	4
North Kazakhstan region	10	0	0
Turkestan region	19	5	4
Ulytau region	0	0	2
Foreign countries*	11	1	0

**Includes Russia, Latvia, Uzbekistan, Mongolia*

Interpretation: The data highlight persistent and structurally embedded regional disparities in program participation. Candidates from central and eastern regions, along with major cities, remained strongly overrepresented throughout all cohorts, suggesting that metropolitan and industrial centres enjoy cumulative advantages in terms of access to information, quality of educational and training institutions, and availability of professional networks supportive of PYPR applications. By contrast, contributions from many western and northern areas steadily declined, pointing to weaker institutional support, fewer role models in the public sector, and potentially higher opportunity costs of participation for talented professionals in resource-dependent regions.

While the descriptive statistics do not allow for a full causal decomposition of these patterns, they indicate that regional origin likely shapes both the probability

of applying and the probability of successfully navigating the multi-stage selection process. In this sense, the PYPR currently functions more as a «social elevator» for those already embedded in favourable regional ecosystems than for candidates from structurally disadvantaged territories. The reduction in candidates residing abroad, finally, may reflect both evolving eligibility requirements and a shift in the program’s outreach priorities towards domestically based talent. Addressing these imbalances—through targeted information campaigns, preparatory support, and closer cooperation with regional universities and akimats—remains essential to ensuring broader inclusivity and legitimacy of the selection process.

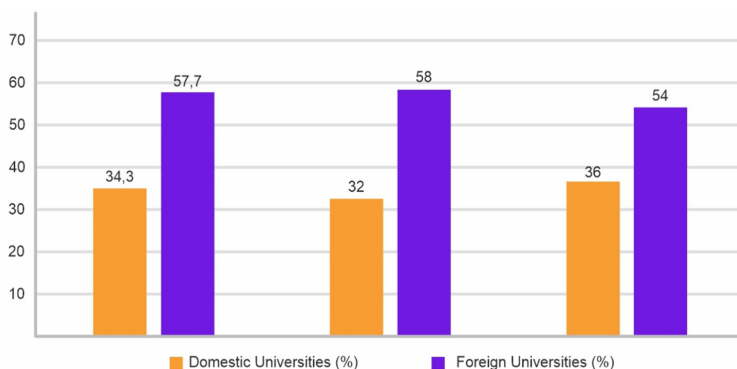
4.3 Educational Background

Educational attainment is a defining attribute of the PYPR profile. As shown in Table 6, the majority of participants across all cohorts held master’s degrees, indicating a consistently high qualification threshold. In addition, Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of educational institution origin across cohorts. The chart shows that approximately half—or slightly more—of all candidates received their education from foreign universities, reflecting the program’s elite orientation and emphasis on international academic experience.

Table 6. Highest Degree Attained

Cohort Year	Master’s Degree (%)	Doctorate (%)
2019	77.7	1.7
2021	80.0	0
2023	74.0	2.0

Figure 2. Educational Institution Origin by Cohort



Interpretation: A majority of participants held master’s degrees, demonstrating a high qualification threshold. Approximately half had foreign education backgrounds, underscoring the program’s emphasis on attracting candidates with international academic exposure.

4.4 Professional Background and Experience

The professional experience of selected candidates demonstrated a gradual decline in average years of prior work, as shown in Table 8. This pattern suggests a

trend toward greater inclusion of younger professionals with comparatively shorter employment histories.

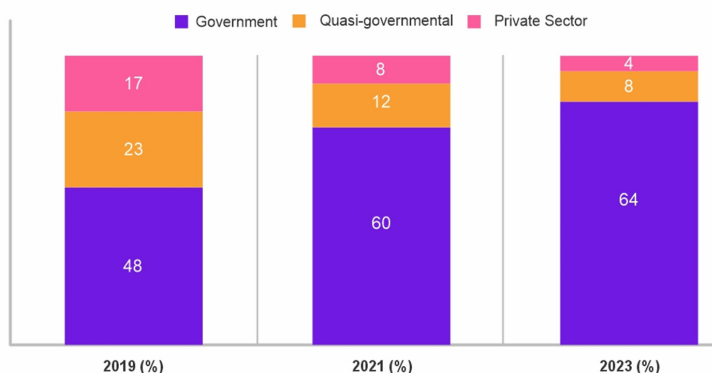
Table 8. Average Age of Selected Candidates

Cohort Year	Mean Years of Experience
2019	9
2021	8
2023	7

Observations: The average years of prior work experience declined across cohorts, indicating that the program has progressively shifted towards engaging candidates earlier in their careers.

The sectoral origins of participants shifted notably over time, with a rising proportion of candidates coming from government institutions, as illustrated in Figure 3. Conversely, representation from the private sector declined steadily across cohorts.

Figure 3. Sector of Origin by Cohort



Interpretation: The proportion of candidates with government backgrounds increased, while representation from the private sector declined, suggesting a trend towards reinforcing internal public sector pipelines.

4.5 Preliminary Hypothesis Testing

Chi-square tests revealed a statistically significant association between foreign educational background and appointment in central agencies ($\chi^2 = 12.4$, $p < 0.05$), partially supporting Hypothesis H2. No statistically significant correlation was found between gender and promotion rates, suggesting that while female underrepresentation persists in selection, subsequent career progression may be less gender-dependent.

Specifically, the association between foreign education and appointment yielded $\chi^2 = 12.4$, $p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.18$, indicating a moderate effect size. The association between gender and appointment was weaker ($\chi^2 = 3.2$, $p = 0.073$, Cramer's $V = 0.09$).

4.6 Summary of Key Trends

The competition ratio increased substantially, reaching levels comparable to international flagship programs.

Gender and regional imbalances persist despite incremental progress.

The educational profile remains highly selective, with a strong emphasis on advanced degrees and foreign education.

The growing prevalence of government-sector experience suggests an internalization of candidate pipelines.

Career outcomes for earlier cohorts demonstrate a strong record of appointments and promotions.

These findings provide a robust basis for the ensuing discussion of program effectiveness, international comparability, and policy implications.

5 Discussion

This section interprets the findings presented in Section 4 by situating them within the broader theoretical and empirical literature on meritocratic selection, social mobility, and public sector talent management. The discussion is organized into five subsections: selectivity and inclusivity dynamics, demographic and educational stratification, professional trajectories and performance, international comparability, and implications for theory and practice.

5.1 Selectivity and Inclusivity Dynamics

The steep increase in competition ratios—from 24.3 in 2019 to over 170 in 2021—confirms that the PYPR has become progressively more selective. This trajectory mirrors global trends, where flagship public sector programs deliberately tighten selection criteria to signal prestige and reinforce meritocratic legitimacy [3, 5].

However, heightened selectivity raises critical questions about inclusivity. Although the number of applications grew substantially, the reduction in cohort size (from 300 to 50) may have unintended exclusionary effects on candidates from less privileged regions and backgrounds. This dynamic resonates with Sandel's [9] critique of meritocracy as potentially reinforcing social stratification under the guise of fairness.

From a public administration perspective, maintaining an optimal balance between elite selection and representativeness remains a complex policy challenge [20]. For Kazakhstan, where regional disparities and socio-economic inequalities persist, overly narrow pipelines risk undermining the program's legitimacy as a genuine «social elevator».

5.2 Demographic and Educational Stratification

Consistent with prior research on talent management in transitional economies [3], the study reveals that the PYPR has a predominantly urban, highly educated, and male-dominated composition. Although the share of female participants improved over time (from 12% to 20%), the gap relative to the broader public sector workforce (approx. 55% female) remains substantial.

The concentration of candidates from Almaty and Astana underscores the structural advantages enjoyed by residents of economic centres—access to high-quality schools and universities, exposure to central government institutions, dense professional networks, and proximity to decision-making hubs. This regional stratification aligns with findings from Ingrams on post-Soviet public services,

where administrative reforms often fail to transcend existing territorial inequalities and instead channel opportunities towards already privileged locations. In the context of the PYPR, metropolitan and industrial regions effectively function as «feeder zones» for the national talent pipeline, while many western and northern regions remain weakly represented despite sizeable pools of potential candidates.

These regional imbalances have at least three implications for how the PYPR operates as a meritocratic «social elevator». First, they suggest that the playing field is not fully level at the entry point: candidates from peripheral regions may face disadvantages in accessing information about the programme, preparing for its competency-based assessments, and building relevant professional portfolios. Second, the underrepresentation of certain regions in the Reserve may translate into uneven territorial distribution of future leaders, reinforcing centre–periphery dynamics within the civil service and potentially limiting the state’s capacity to address region-specific policy challenges. Third, the persistence of such disparities risks weakening the programme’s symbolic function as a national mechanism of upward mobility, particularly if citizens in underrepresented regions come to view it as primarily serving metropolitan elites.

Equally notable is the high prevalence of foreign-educated candidates (over 50% across all cohorts), which—while reflecting strong internationalisation—raises questions about the inclusivity of domestic educational institutions. Regional disparities intersect with this pattern: candidates from major cities are more likely to have studied abroad or at prestigious domestic universities, amplifying their competitive edge in the selection process. Similar dynamics have been observed in Singapore’s Administrative Service [6], where foreign credentials serve as a proxy for competence but can also perpetuate geographically and socio-economically concentrated elite enclaves. For Kazakhstan, this interaction between regional origin and educational capital underscores the need to consider territorial equity not as a separate issue, but as a core dimension of meritocratic talent management.

5.3 Professional Trajectories and Performance

The results indicate that the PYPR has been effective in translating selection outcomes into concrete appointments and promotions, especially for the 2019 cohort. Approximately 70% of participants secured positions in central or local government or national companies, with a significant proportion achieving multiple promotions.

This conversion rate compares favorably to international benchmarks. For instance:

- The UK Fast Stream reports a similar appointment rate (~80%) but with longer time-to-promotion cycles.
- The US PMF program often faces bottlenecks in transitioning fellows into permanent roles [3].
- The Russian Leaders program, despite extensive publicity, does not consistently guarantee appointments [17].

These findings reinforce the notion that structured talent pipelines can be powerful instruments for accelerating administrative renewal [1]. At the same time, the decline in private-sector entrants over time suggests a potential narrowing of professional diversity within the Reserve.

5.4 International Comparability and Unique Features

A comparative analysis with major international talent programs highlights both

commonalities and distinctive attributes of the PYPR, as shown in Table 10. While the program shares certain features with established initiatives such as the Fast Stream in the UK and the Administrative Service in Singapore, it also demonstrates unique patterns in competition, educational emphasis, and career support mechanisms.

Table 10. Comparative Features of Major Talent Programs

Feature	Fast Stream (UK)	PMF (US)	Administrative Service (Singapore)	Leaders of Russia	PYPR (Kazakhstan)
Cohort Size	~1,000	~500	~50	~300	50–300
Competition Ratio	~20–100	~15	~20	>200	24–172
Female Participation (%)	~50	~55	~35	~30	12–20
Foreign Education Emphasis	Medium	Low	Very High	Low	High
Appointment Guarantee	High	Medium	High	Low	Medium-High
Mentorship and Rotation	Extensive	Medium	Very Extensive	Limited	Limited
<i>All tables rely on the core dataset provided by the Agency (7 Mar 2025)</i>					

Interpretation: The PYPR exhibits several distinctive attributes. It demonstrates high competition levels akin to Leaders of Russia and a significant emphasis on foreign education comparable to Singapore’s Administrative Service. While the program offers moderate guarantees of appointment—surpassing the PMF in conversion rates—it lacks the structured rotational assignments and mentorship frameworks characteristic of the most mature international programs. These unique features suggest that the PYPR has integrated multiple global practices but has yet to develop robust career support systems to sustain long-term professional development.

5.5 Implications for Theory and Practice

Theoretical Implications:

The findings support the proposition that meritocratic programs in transitional economies can achieve high legitimacy and performance when properly institutionalized.

They also confirm Sandel’s [9] caution that overemphasis on selective excellence can exacerbate socio-demographic inequalities.

Practical Implications:

Policymakers should consider introducing structured mentorship and rotational assignments to deepen professional development.

Proactive measures to enhance regional and gender diversity are essential to preserve the Reserve’s credibility as an inclusive social elevator.

Strengthening the links between selection and long-term career progression (e.g., through transparent promotion frameworks) can mitigate demotivation among participants.

Limitations and Future Research:

This study’s reliance on descriptive data limits causal inference.

Future research could employ longitudinal designs, survey-based assessments of Public Service Motivation, and comparative case studies to further enrich understanding.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study extends the understanding of meritocracy in transitional economies by demonstrating how institutional design interacts with pre-existing socio-economic inequalities. The findings highlight the paradox that while meritocratic pipelines can enhance legitimacy and performance, they may simultaneously entrench elite reproduction unless complemented by inclusive policy measures. This duality reinforces the relevance of integrating social mobility theory and PSM into public sector talent management scholarship.

5.6 Concluding Synthesis

Overall, the PYPR demonstrates considerable success in attracting high-caliber candidates and facilitating their integration into the public sector. Its evolution from a broad-based initiative to a highly selective pipeline reflects both a maturing approach to talent management and the inherent trade-offs between exclusivity and inclusivity. For Kazakhstan and comparable contexts, sustaining the legitimacy and impact of such programs will depend on striking a balance between meritocratic rigor and equitable representation.

6 Conclusion

This study has offered a comprehensive examination of the PYPR as a unique institutional experiment in Kazakhstan's public administration. Drawing on three waves of program data (2019, 2021, and 2023), the research has assessed the Reserve's design, demographic composition, selection dynamics, and outcomes, situating these findings within the broader literature on meritocracy, social mobility, and public service talent management.

6.1 Summary of Main Findings

Rising Selectivity: The PYPR has evolved into an increasingly selective program, with the competition ratio surging from approximately 24 in 2019 to over 170 in 2021. This trend underscores its prestige but raises concerns about equitable access.

Demographic Patterns: Participants are predominantly male, urban-based, and holders of advanced degrees—especially from foreign institutions. Although incremental progress has been made in gender inclusion (female representation rising from 12% to 20%), significant disparities remain.

The 95% confidence interval for the proportion of female participants in the 2023 cohort was [11.1%, 28.9%].

Professional Outcomes: The program has demonstrated a robust capacity to translate selection into appointments, with over 70% of the initial cohort securing positions and a noteworthy proportion achieving multiple promotions.

International Comparison: Relative to other flagship programs (Fast Stream, PMF, Administrative Service), the PYPR exhibits strong competition and appointment rates but underdeveloped mentorship structures and limited regional diversification.

6.2 Contributions to Theory

The findings contribute to the growing body of literature exploring how meritocratic ideals and talent pipelines operate in transitional economies. They validate the dual role of such programs as both instruments of administrative

professionalization and symbols of legitimacy. However, they also reaffirm Sandel's [9] argument that meritocratic selection—without accompanying measures for inclusivity—can inadvertently reproduce structural inequalities.

6.3 Policy and Practice Recommendations

Based on the analysis, several actionable recommendations emerge:

- **Enhance Inclusivity:** Introduce regional quotas or targeted outreach to improve participation from underrepresented regions.

Develop gender-sensitive recruitment campaigns to attract more female candidates.

- **Strengthen Development Support:** Establish structured mentorship arrangements with senior public servants.

Implement rotational assignments across ministries and agencies to broaden experiential learning.

- **Increase Transparency:** Publish annual reports with detailed appointment and promotion statistics disaggregated by demographic variables.

Create an online platform where participants can track their career progression.

- **Balance Selectivity and Access:** While maintaining high standards, consider flexible pathways (e.g., thematic tracks) for candidates with diverse professional profiles.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

Promising avenues for further inquiry include:

Longitudinal tracking of cohort members to assess long-term career trajectories and retention.

Comparative studies of similar talent pipelines in Central Asia and Eastern Europe.

Quantitative assessment of the impact of program participation on organizational performance metrics.

Examination of the role of PSM and intrinsic values in sustaining commitment among participants.

Future research could benefit from mixed-methods designs that incorporate longitudinal tracking of career outcomes, in-depth interviews with participants, and comparative case studies across Central Asia. Such approaches would enrich our understanding of how merit-based talent programs influence public sector innovation, legitimacy, and societal trust over time.

6.5 Final Reflection

The PYPR stands as a significant innovation in Kazakhstan's efforts to modernize its public administration and cultivate a new generation of merit-based leaders. Its successes are noteworthy, but its future effectiveness will depend on navigating the inherent tensions between selectivity, inclusivity, and sustained professional development. As emerging economies grapple with the challenge of building agile, competent, and legitimate public sectors, the lessons from the PYPR offer valuable insights for scholars and policymakers alike.

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