



## ARTICLE

# Public Trust and Perception of Justice in Law Enforcement in Kazakhstan

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### ABSTRACT

The study provides an overview of the *Just Kazakhstan* program, initiated in the aftermath of the 2022 January events, providing insights into how government initiatives aimed at promoting fairness can potentially positively impact trust in law enforcement, which has been tested by domestic turmoil. Public trust in law enforcement agencies is a critical issue; however, key factors influencing this trust remain underexplored. The authors argue that, beyond traditional determinants like procedural justice and performance, the perception of society as mostly just plays a significant role in shaping individuals' trust in public institutions, including law enforcement. To test this theory, the authors employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis on data from a survey of Kazakhstani citizens, using separate models to analyze the effect of perceived justice alongside control variables based on procedural justice, social capital, and performance theories. The findings reveal a statistically significant relationship between perceptions of societal justice and trust in law enforcement, supporting both the authors' theory and prior literature. This research suggests that perceptions of fairness

and equal application of the law are key factors in fostering public trust, even for individuals without direct contact with law enforcement. This research complements existing studies on public trust by highlighting the broader societal perceptions that influence trust in institutions.

### KEYWORDS

public trust, justice, law enforcement, procedural justice, performance theory, social capital

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## Introduction

The work of law enforcement agencies (LEAs) is important in guaranteeing security and stability in society (Ren et al., 2005). Their competence defines the extent to which communities can feel safe, and it is conducive to cooperation of citizens with the institutions in order to increase their effectiveness (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Murphy, 2013; Panditharatne et al., 2021). Effective performance of these institutions affects such aspects of public life as “public compliance with the law, public cooperation with the police, and public willingness to support policies that empower the police” (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003).

At the same time, one of the key characteristics of the work done by LEAs is the extent to which they are embedded within the local community and the nature of their interaction with the representatives of that community. Lack of community confidence in LEAs can negatively impact their performance (Berthelot et al., 2018; Bradford & Jackson, 2010), since citizens would be less inclined to interact or cooperate with law enforcement agents. Therefore, of particular importance is ensuring that the level of public trust in law enforcement agencies is identified while considering the key factors influencing its presence or absence. Extensive research has been conducted on factors that affect public trust in LEAs (Boateng, 2016; Bradford & Jackson, 2010; Cao, 2015; Farren et al., 2018; Goldsmith, 2005; Han et al., 2017; Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2011; Ren et al., 2005).

Public trust in various agencies, including police, the Committee of National Security (KNB), and even the army, was put under a stress test in January 2022, when Kazakhstan experienced one of the most dramatic episodes of domestic turmoil in its history of independence. In order to understand how such crises of legitimacy might affect public trust in state institutions, we aim to analyze established theories of trust in institutions. In addition, we intend to determine whether the initiatives taken by the Kazakh government following the turmoil had any impact on public trust.

This study will focus on public perceptions of justice and the prospective impact of these perceptions on trust in legal institutions. The main idea advanced in this study is that citizens who perceive their society and government as unjust are less likely to trust LEAs. As a result, such perceptions can have various negative repercussions for interactions between citizens and LEAs, as well as for the effectiveness of the latter and the degree of social cohesion within local communities.

The study relies on data gathered from respondents in Kazakhstan, a country whose government has recently announced a host of reforms under the title of *Ädiletті Qazaqstan—Adal azamat* [Just Kazakhstan—Fair Citizen] (Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, n.d.). The reform program includes, among other things, measures to improve the performance of LEAs, including procedural fairness and professionalism of law enforcement. The survey, which was conducted in September 2023, involved 2,000 respondents from all regions of the country, including 17 regions (*oblys*) and three municipalities with national status (the capital Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent).

In this case, the consideration of geography creates potential for this research contributing towards assessing the issue of trust in LEAs. While extensive research has been conducted on public trust in law enforcement agencies in Western democracies, notably in the United States and other states in the Global North, less is known about how these dynamics play out in emerging economies like Kazakhstan. Unlike countries with more established democracies, Kazakhstan is undergoing significant political and judicial reforms aimed at building a more just society. These reforms, particularly the *Just Kazakhstan* initiative, provide a timely and unique backdrop for examining how public perceptions of justice influence trust in law enforcement.

Research shows that when people perceive their society or government as unjust, they are less likely to place confidence in the very institutions meant to protect and serve them, and vice versa. All measures of public perception of justice in society, which included general perception of justice, perception of change in levels of justice and specifically perceptions of injustice in LEAs, demonstrated a statistically significant relationship with public trust in law enforcement. At the same time, this research provides support for other existing theories in the literature, suggesting a multitude of factors that impact public trust in law enforcement.

### ***The Case of Post-January 2022 Kazakhstan***

In the context of mass mobilization, Kudaibergenova and Laruelle (2022) examine the January 2022 protests in Kazakhstan, interpreting them as a manifestation of a broader legitimacy crisis. Their analysis underscores the role of eroding trust in state institutions and elite stagnation in shaping citizens' willingness to engage in protest. When it comes to the Kazakhstani context in the aftermath of *Bloody January* (as those events are known), the question of justice and public perception of justice has become relevant since the government under Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced a set of reforms known as *Just Kazakhstan*. The concept of *Just Kazakhstan*, first introduced by the President in his speech at the National Quryltai (Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, n.d.), outlines systematic changes of national institutions in a way that

makes them more just, as well as cultivating justice on an individual level, combining it with a sense of civic responsibility, known as the concept of *Adal Azamat* [Responsible Citizen] (O merakh po realizatsii, 2022).

Actions on the initiatives were clearly reflected in the plan of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan titled *Just Kazakhstan: For All of Us and For Each of Us*. Based on this plan, several initiatives have been launched, including measures to improve the work of LEAs. The focus has been on the implementation, among others, of the following measures (O merakh po realizatsii, 2022):

1. Establishing new institutions to safeguard citizens' rights and freedoms within the framework of political modernization. This includes developing proposals to enhance the functions of the Constitutional Court, the Human Rights Ombudsman, and the Ombudsman for Children's Rights.
2. Promoting equal status for court chairpersons by introducing fair and independent judicial initiatives, including modifying certain positions to judges and abandoning repressive approaches. Additionally, this entails enhancing the protection of citizens' rights involved in criminal prosecution, improving the system of intellectual analysis in justice, implementing effective civil proceedings using modern technologies and mediation, and strengthening the pre-trial proceedings system.
3. Strengthening prosecutorial oversight of the observance of constitutional rights, focusing on the protection of citizens' rights, and developing a service-oriented, professional model for the Kazakhstani police in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Despite its relevance for understanding state legitimacy and political stability, institutional trust in Kazakhstan remains insufficiently explored in the scholarly literature. Recently, a limited number of studies have been conducted on this topic, identifying important determinants but also revealing significant gaps, particularly with regard to trust in law enforcement agencies.

Junisbai and Junisbai (2019) offer a comparative perspective on institutional trust in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, highlighting how macro-level factors contribute to higher trust levels in Kazakhstan, such as economic performance driven by natural resource rents and the relative stability of authoritarian governance. Their study further demonstrates that individual characteristics, including age, ethnicity, income, and Internet usage, are associated with varying levels of institutional trust. For instance, among Kazakhstani respondents, increased Internet activity and stronger democratic orientations were linked to lower trust in the judiciary and police.

Digital media environments have also emerged as a critical factor. Bekmagambetov et al. (2018) investigate the impact of social media information flows on political trust and protest behavior among Kazakhstani college students. Their findings suggest that critical or misleading online content can diminish institutional trust and, in some cases, stimulate political activism, particularly among younger and more educated individuals.

At the regional level, Zhunussova (2022) explores variations in institutional trust across Kazakhstan using World Values Survey data. The author finds that subjective well-being, financial status, and perceptions of corruption are key predictors of

institutional trust. Importantly, her work also links higher levels of trust with greater political engagement, including participation in protest activity.

While these studies contribute valuable insights, they collectively point to a notable gap in the literature: the specific drivers of trust in law enforcement institutions remain underexamined. Given the centrality of the police to state–society relations, further empirical investigation is needed to better understand how social, economic, and informational factors influence public perceptions of law enforcement in Kazakhstan, particularly in the wake of the 2022 January events, the crisis of legitimacy in law enforcement and the Just Kazakhstan doctrine.

## Literature Review

### ***Determinants of Trust in LEAs***

Literature on determinants of public trust in LEAs emphasizes the role of sociodemographic characteristics of the population as one of the key factors that affect trust. Previous research has extensively reviewed how such factors as age (Farren et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2021; Roché & Hough, 2018), gender (Barnes et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2014), belonging to a minority group (Jacob, 1971; Sargeant et al., 2013; Tyler, 2001, 2005; Van Craen, 2012, 2013), and socioeconomic status (Panditharatne et al., 2021) affect public trust in LEAs, specifically when it comes to police work. Cross-country analysis reveals that there might be a national baseline for confidence that then varies based on sociodemographic differences within the population (Jang et al., 2010), while others point to stability of political regime as positively affecting trust in police (Cao et al., 2012).

Research also generally finds that as people grow older, their views on LEAs tend to become more favorable (Berthelot et al., 2018; Murphy et al., 2014; Nix et al., 2015). At the same time, specific studies have addressed the question of trust in police and LEAs among adolescents. This group is important, since most criminal activity and potential encounters with police begin at this age. For instance, Farren et al. (2018) suggest that trust in police and perception of their legitimacy affects the willingness of teenagers to obey law similarly to older citizens, indicating that individual perception could have more of an influence on public trust. Meanwhile, Lacks & Gordon (2005) suggest that adolescents in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods have a more positive view of police compared to adults, contrary to the expectation that they would adopt the views of the older generation.

More robust evidence has been provided regarding the effect of socioeconomic status of citizens and their perception of LEAs. Economically disadvantaged citizens tend to trust LEAs less compared to those who are well-off. For example, studies have shown that *concentrated disadvantage* impacts public perceptions of police and trust in police workers. Research by Gau et al. (2012) and Wu et al. (2009) indicate that citizens in densely populated urban areas with low levels of economic well-being tend to have more negative encounters with law enforcement officers, leading to lower trust in such institutions among them. This often results in reluctance to cooperate with LEAs, which can decrease the effectiveness of these institutions in maintaining order and preventing crime in such areas.

There are some cases, for example, the well-researched case of the United States, where concentrated disadvantage is also linked with the experience of racial minorities, where they also tend to have lower levels of trust in police and other LEAs. Similarly, in other countries, minorities also tend to have more negative encounters with LEAs, which leads to a decrease in trust. For instance, research conducted among ethnic minorities in New Zealand (Panditharatne et al., 2021) confirms that such groups indeed have less trust in police. Moreover, the effect is heightened when considering the intersection between socioeconomic status and minority status, as economically disadvantaged minority groups tend to trust in LEAs even less. Study of Vietnamese minorities in Australia demonstrated that procedural justice had less of an impact on trust among that community compared to other ethnic groups in the country (Sargeant et al., 2013). Study of trust among minorities in Belgium suggested similar patterns in how social capital, procedural justice, and police performance affect trust of minorities in LEAs (Van Craen, 2013).

The literature also addresses the effect of initiatives aimed at improving LEA performance and increasing public trust in these institutions. These initiatives include de-escalation training (Engel et al., 2022), use of body-cams (Saulnier et al., 2020), and HR practices at police workplace (Kalyal & Grabarski, 2021), as well as various community engagement measures (Bartkowiak-Theron, 2011). Research demonstrates that certain initiatives are effective in improving public trust. However, while it is important to consider ways in which such initiatives might influence public perception and trust in LEAs, a more fundamental approach needs to be adopted in understanding the extent to which citizens would be inclined to view such interventions as effective and conducive of trust.

### ***Theories of Trust in Institutions***

Extensive research has been conducted on factors affecting public trust in LEAs and institutions in general beyond sociodemographic characteristics of the population. Prominent theories discussed and analyzed in literature include procedural justice theory, performance theory, and social capital theory, or theory of collective efficacy (Van Craen, 2013).

According to the theory of procedural justice advocated by Tyler and Rasinski (1991) and Greenberg and Tyler (1987), when law enforcement officers perform their duties and exercise their powers in accordance with established procedures, this generally increases the level of trust in them on the part of citizens. This means that one of the key determinants of social trust in LEAs is the extent to which these institutions treat individuals and exercise their authority with fairness and in accordance with rules (Tyler, 2001). In a way, perceptions of procedural justice of LEAs are indicative of their legitimacy in the eyes of society, since the public will consider such institutions legitimate only if they are capable of performing their work in a fair and just manner (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003). This theory is based on psychological research regarding general attitudes of the public towards institutions and legal authorities as neutral third parties that consistently uphold certain procedures (Tyler, 1989). Extensive body of research has been dedicated to examining procedural justice theory and how it

explains varying levels of trust in police among society (Boateng, 2016; Donner et al., 2015; Gau et al., 2012; Hough et al., 2013; Murphy et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2021; Nix et al., 2015; Walters & Bolger, 2019; Wolfe et al., 2016).

Related to this is the body work that considers performance of various government institutions (Bouckaert et al., 2002), including LEAs (Panditharatne et al., 2021). Various indicators of institutional effectiveness are important to consider at this point. For example, general perceptions of effectiveness can be taken into account, i.e., the extent to which the public holds certain institutions responsible for aspects such as maintaining justice in society. As such, trust levels will be contingent on public perception of how successful these institutions are at upholding justice. Conversely, research also considers public perception of how institutions actually perform and how that affects their trust in these institutions. For instance, the extent to which LEAs actually contribute to social order, crime prevention, and resolution will affect public view of LEAs and their levels of trust (Larsen & Blair, 2009; Ren et al., 2005). This, in turn, overlaps with procedural justice theory as it relates to LEA activity, with the difference being that performance theory focuses more on the outcomes of LEA work, while procedural justice, as the name suggests, focuses on procedural performance.

Another prominent theory that is used to explain public trust in police is social capital theory (or theory of perceived collective efficacy), put forward in works by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000). This theory describes social ties that exist in a community, which are reflected in levels of civic engagement, residential trust, and enforcement of community norms (Van Craen, 2013). According to this theory, communities with high levels of internal cohesion and reciprocity among its members would respectively result in its members being engaged in monitoring the situation within their neighborhood. That in turn indirectly results in an increased effectiveness of police work, which further enhances community trust in police and LEAs. Social capital theory has been used to explain levels of trust in police among minority communities in the United States (Macdonald & Stokes, 2006; Newton, 2001; Rothstein & Stolle, 2008), with examples of focusing on collective efficacy in policing “hotspots” (Weisburd et al., 2015). In addition, several studies have utilized this theory to explain public trust in LEAs in states like China (Han et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2012), and Finland (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2011). Thus, several factors determining public trust in LEAs have been identified in the literature, which will be included in the analysis within the framework of this study.

## Theory

To strengthen the theoretical framework of the study, it is necessary to clarify the causal mechanisms linking perceptions of procedural fairness and institutional legitimacy to trust in law enforcement agencies. Existing scholarship on legitimacy and procedural justice offers important insights for understanding this relationship. For instance, theory by Luhmann (1983) on “legitimation by procedure” states that in modern, functionally differentiated societies, legitimacy is no longer derived solely from shared values or substantive outcomes, but rather from the perceived rationality,



predictability, and fairness of procedures. This approach emphasizes that when decisions and actions of public institutions are seen as procedurally fair, they are more likely to be accepted as legitimate, regardless of their content.

Building on this, Tyler (2006) argues that individuals obey the law and cooperate with legal authorities not merely out of self-interest or fear of sanctions, but because they perceive the legal system as legitimate. Central to this perception is procedural justice, which encompasses such dimensions as neutrality, voice, respectful treatment, and trust in the motives of authority figures. These elements foster a sense of inclusion and moral alignment with the institution, reinforcing both legitimacy and trust. Moreover, Tyler and Blader (2000) show that group identification processes are shaped by perceptions of procedural fairness, which in turn influence behavioral engagement and cooperation with authorities. Similarly, Solum (2004) conceptualizes procedural justice as a normative value that ensures dignity, equality, and meaningful participation. He argues that legitimacy arises when individuals are treated not merely as objects of regulation, but as autonomous participants in a fair process.

While similar in some ways to theories proposed in previous literature, the argument in this paper attempts to establish a broader view of how individuals perceive justice in society and the ways in which it affects their trust in LEAs. Procedural justice theory has yielded conclusive results in the literature (Donner et al., 2015; Hough et al., 2013; Mazerolle et al., 2013; Nix et al., 2015; Walters & Bolger, 2019), especially regarding personal encounters between citizens and LEA officers. However, it does not fully account for the general population's trust in these institutions. Procedural justice theory would be effective at explaining how trust emerges and evolves in specific contexts; for instance, among the minority groups or citizens in socioeconomically vulnerable districts and regions and research into trust among such groups could prove to be useful. At the same time, alternative explanations could provide more insight into how citizens form their views concerning the LEAs, particularly in cases outside of states in the Global North, including that of Kazakhstan.

This research offers an alternative explanation that would account for broader societal perceptions of justice and trust. First of all, while previous research mostly considers and discusses *determinants* of public perception of justice, we advance public perception of justice as the factor that *impacts* the degree of trust in public institutions, including law enforcement. Public attitudes towards broader concepts, such as the overall degree of justice in society, offer a more comprehensive understanding than focusing solely on perceptions of LEA performance, individual encounters or views of collective efficacy (Houston & Harding, 2013).

Another crucial aspect of this study is distinguishing between the *perception* of justice and its actual *practice*. The perception of justice, rather than its actual implementation, may significantly influence the extent to which citizens trust various institutions, including LEAs. There might in fact exist a gulf between the two, with the public potentially underestimating the level of justice in their society. For instance, research on policing in Scotland that employed a randomized experiment demonstrated that actual encounters do not necessarily affect general perception of police among participants (MacQueen & Bradford, 2015). Moreover, research demonstrates that



the public knowledge of the criminal justice system is fairly limited, with members of the public not being well familiarized with crime rates in their societies (Roberts, 1992). Negative public perception of justice can thereafter lead to lower levels of trust in various institutions, since citizens would be inclined to view these institutions as perpetrators of societal injustice.

In addition, it is possible to envision a situation where a decrease in public perception of justice can lead to a decreasing trust in LEAs. This, in turn, might discourage individuals from interacting with LEAs, as they will expect agents to perform their work in an unjust manner. Subsequent drop in interaction between LEAs and citizens could adversely affect how successfully agents perform their duties. Poor performance of LEAs, which is at the core of the procedural justice theory, could create a negative feedback loop that contributes even further to decline in trust individuals have in law enforcement.

This phenomenon aligns with a more extensive body of research on public perceptions of inequality. Studies have shown that individuals tend to view their society to be more unequal than it is in reality (Hauser & Norton, 2017), and one of the factors that contribute to variance in perceptions is the socioeconomic status of individuals (Knell & Stix, 2017). These perceptions shape their attitudes towards various aspects of social life, including trust in institutions (Uslaner & Brown, 2005) and support for various political initiatives (Van Heuvelen, 2017).

As such, the central relationship that this research examines is that between public perception of justice and trust in LEAs. We hypothesize that the more individuals perceive their society to be just, the higher they are likely to trust various formal institutions, including LEAs. This relationship is expected to be mediated by such factors as demographic characteristics, socioeconomic status, previous encounters with law enforcement, and broader societal attitudes towards government institutions, with regard to the extent to which the government is the key agent responsible for upholding justice in the society. In acknowledging the effect of these factors, we expect public perception of justice to be a significant predictor of trust in LEAs, since it would more effectively explain the attitudes of the majority of the population.

Perception of justice can consist of various factors. For the purposes of this research, several means of operationalization were identified. First, the general perception of justice in society is considered. While vague in its conceptualization, it reflects the attitudes individuals have regarding the level of justice in their society. Second, key sources of injustice are explored, with a particular focus on public perception of lack of justice in LEAs. It has to be mentioned that law enforcement is perceived to be one of the main spheres that individuals perceive to be lacking in justice, as corroborated by previous research (Rothstein & Stolle, 2002). Third, this research considers perception of change in justice among individuals. If the public believes that their society has become less just or if they expect their society to become less just in the future, it is also indicative of their views of justice in the present. Finally, public perception of justice is reflected in the extent to which they support or feel confidence in government-led reforms or initiatives towards improving justice in society.

As such, the following hypotheses are put forward as part of the theoretic framework for this research:

**Hypothesis 1:** General public perception of justice has a significant positive effect on trust in LEAs.

**Hypothesis 2:** Public perception of lack of justice in LEAs has a significant negative effect on trust in LEAs.

**Hypothesis 3:** Public perception of change in justice has a significant positive effect on trust in LEAs.

**Hypothesis 4:** Public confidence of government-led justice reforms has a positive effect on trust in LEAs.

With these hypotheses, we predict that for a significance level of  $\alpha = .05$ , the regression coefficient for general public perception of justice, lack of justice in law enforcement agencies, change in justice year-on-year, and for public confidence in government-led justice reforms will be notably greater than zero in our regression model predicting trust in law enforcement agencies. Moreover, in this context, Hypothesis 3 posits that perceived procedural justice in the actions of law enforcement is positively associated with perceptions of legitimacy. Hypothesis 4 further suggests that legitimacy, shaped by such procedural experiences, serves as a key predictor of trust in law enforcement institutions. The causal mechanism, therefore, operates through individuals' psychological and normative assessments of fairness: fair procedures enhance perceived legitimacy, which, in turn, strengthens institutional trust.

It is worth noting that rather than focusing on specific agencies, e.g., police, this research aims to identify how citizens view the law enforcement system in general. Such an aggregated view can provide a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of public trust in the system as a whole. Beyond the work of police, law enforcement in the case of Kazakhstan also includes the office of attorneys, anti-corruption services and agencies for economic investigations (Qūqyq qorğau qyzmeti turaly, 2011). Authors find it important to include these institutions as well, as their performance constitutes a significant part of law enforcement work in Kazakhstan and might be ignored if research only focuses on police work. It is essential to consider the broader spectrum of law enforcement and what might affect public trust in these institutions.

## Methodology

### *Survey Description*

This research relies on data gathered as part of the project funded by the Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Religious Studies of the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A survey was conducted in all 20 administrative divisions of Kazakhstan (17 *oblys* and three cities with national status), and sampling additionally relied on considerations of sociodemographic characteristics of these regions. A total of 2,000 respondents were interviewed as part of the survey, with 1188 complete responses recorded for use in this research. The survey was administered in September 2023, approximately a year into the presidential term of Kassym-Jomart Tokayev and the launching of the

*Just Kazakhstan* program. Survey sample ranges in terms of age (18 to 88 years), gender (45.2% male and 54.8% female), and ethnicity (70.1% Kazakh, 19.6% Russian, and 10.4% other), corresponding to the overall demographic makeup of the Republic. While quite extensive and considerate of key theories of justice and trust, survey data is not exhaustive and does not allow the opportunity to analyze some of the variables established in the literature.

Certain limitations exist regarding the sensitivity of the research topic. When surveys address perceptions of law enforcement or other state institutions, respondents may adjust their answers due to concerns about how their views may be perceived. As shown in the work of Kuran (1997), individuals may engage in preference falsification, while Noelle-Neumann's (1993) spiral of silence theory explains how perceived social norms can suppress dissenting opinions.

Although this study used face-to-face interviews, which can be vulnerable to social desirability bias, efforts were made to ensure confidentiality and neutrality in the data collection process. Previous research (Korsunava & Sokolov, 2023) confirms that carefully designed surveys can still produce valid results, even in politically sensitive contexts. Nonetheless, this potential source of response distortion should be considered when interpreting the findings.

**Dependent Variable.** As part of the conducted survey, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they trust various political offices, including courts, law enforcement agencies (LEAs), the president of Kazakhstan, members of Parliament, the cabinet of ministers, and local government. All items of trust demonstrate strong internal consistency ( $\alpha = .90$ ), suggesting the survey questions are highly correlated. Responses were given on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *Completely trust* to *Completely distrust*. Additionally, respondents could indicate difficulty in answering, which was coded as NA for the purposes of analysis ( $n = 105$ ). This question was used for the dependent variable, *Trust in LEAs*. Responses were coded from 1 = *Completely distrust* to 4 = *Completely trust*. The distribution of responses indicates a relatively even split between those who trust and distrust LEAs, with a slight skew towards distrust. This operationalization of the dependent variable is consistent with previous research on public trust in LEAs (Nix et al., 2015).

### **Independent Variables**

In accordance with the theoretical discussion above, this research uses several measures of public perception of justice, namely general perception of justice, perception of injustice in LEAs, perception of change in justice, and belief in *Just Kazakhstan*.

**Perception of Justice.** This key measurement assesses the extent to which citizens believe that the current society of Kazakhstan is just or unjust. The use and operationalization of this variable is similar to the methodology set forth in the literature (Uslaner, 2000). As part of the survey respondents were asked, "Do you believe that the Kazakhstani society today is just or unjust?" Responses included "I believe it is just", "I believe it is unjust," and "Difficult to respond", which allows to code the question as a dichotomous variable for the purposes of statistical analysis.

*Perception of Injustice in Law Enforcement.* In addition to general public perception of justice in Kazakhstani society, a measurement of public perception of injustice in LEAs specifically is used in the analysis. Respondents were asked a question: “In which of the following areas do you feel a lack of justice?” The responses included several options (the court system, LEAs, healthcare, education, housing, etc.), from which respondents could choose up to three. For this research “Law enforcement agencies” was selected and coded as a binary variable with “1” for respondents who selected it and “0” for respondents who did not.

*Perception of Change in Justice.* This variable measures changes in public perception of justice over time. Respondents were asked, “In your opinion, has the Kazakhstani society become more or less just in the last year?” with answers ranging from “It became more just” and “Nothing changed” to “It became less just” and “Difficult to answer.” The items were coded as ordinal values, with “It became less just” coded as 1, “Nothing changed” coded as 2, and “It became more just” coded as 3.

*Belief in Just Government/Just Kazakhstan.* This variable is particularly relevant given the context of recent sociopolitical reforms announced in Kazakhstan. As President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev stated multiple times in his speeches, the key objective is to build Just Kazakhstan, based on principles of “active patriotism and conscious citizenship” (Remarks by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, n.d.). In relation to the concept of *Just Kazakhstan*, respondents answered the question, “Do you believe that it is possible to achieve a Just Kazakhstan?” Responses included “Yes”, “No.” and “Difficult to answer”, and were respectively coded as a binary variable (Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics*

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
<i>Dependent Variable</i>				
Trust in LEAs	2.519	1.154	1	4
<i>Independent Variables</i>				
Perception of justice	.466	.499	0	1
Perception of injustice in LEAs	.318	.466	0	1
Belief in Just Kazakhstan	.654	.475	0	1
Perception of change in justice	2.232	.653	1	3
<i>Control Variables</i>				
Social trust	2.538	1.139	1	4
Responsibility for justice - Government	.493	.500	0	1
Personal encounters with injustice	.280	.449	0	1
Education	2.008	.880	1	3
Urban residence	.623	.485	0	1
Male	.452	.498	0	1
Age	39.250	15.035	18	88

Table 1 Continued

Variable	M	SD	Min	Max
Ethnicity (Kazakh)	.698	.459	0	1
Ethnicity (Russian)	.198	.399	0	1
Ethnicity (Other)	.105	.306	0	1
Socioeconomic status	2.708	1.137	1	5

**Control Variables**

Control variables used for this analysis correspond with theories on determinants of public trust in LEAs, such as performance theory, procedural justice theory, and social capital theory. The analytical model also takes into account various sociodemographic measures, namely age, education, gender, residence, and socioeconomic status.

*Responsibility for Justice—Government.* Previous research suggests that public trust is contingent on views regarding government performance in upholding justice (Van Craen, 2013). As such, the public views of the government as the key actor responsible for upholding justice in society were analyzed. Respondents answered, “Some believe that the government holds responsibility for how just the society is, others believe that it is more about attitudes citizens hold toward each other. Which view personally resonates with you?”, where they could either choose the government or the public as key responsible actors. Responses were coded as a dummy variable with 1 assigned if the respondents chose the government, and 0 if they chose the public, with “Difficult to answer” coded as missing values.

*Social Trust.* Another alternative explanation provided in the literature is offered as part of the social capital theory (also referred to as collective efficacy theory). As mentioned earlier, as citizens have an increased level of trust in each other, they are more likely to perceive LEAs as effective at their duties. Taking this into account, respondents were asked, “In your opinion, do people in Kazakhstan trust each other?” Responses ranged from “Completely disagree” to “Completely agree”. Responses were coded as an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (“Completely disagree”) to 4 (“Completely agree”), and “Difficult to answer” was coded as missing values.

*Personal Encounters With Injustice.* Next, the model includes a measure of procedural justice theory, conceptualized in a manner similar to previous research (Donner et al., 2015; Gau, 2014; MacQueen & Bradford, 2015). Respondents were asked, “Have you personally encountered any form of injustice towards yourself in the last year?”, to which they either answered “Yes,” “No,” or “Difficult to answer.” Responses were coded as a dummy variable: 1 for “Yes,” 0 for “No,” and “Difficult to answer” coded as missing values.

*Sociodemographic Characteristics.* Age, gender, place of residence, education, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity were also used as control variables, in accordance with previous research. *Age* is a numeric variable that was measured as the full number of years reached by the respondent at the time of the survey (as of September 2023). *Gender* was coded as a binary variable, with 0 for women and 1 for men. The *place of residence* variable was similarly coded as binary, where

urban was coded as 1, and rural was coded as 0. *Level of education* was coded as a factor variable and included three responses: “Secondary education,” “Secondary vocational training,” and “Higher education”. *Ethnicity* was coded as a factor variable and included three responses: Kazakh, Russian (main ethnic minority group in Kazakhstan), and other ethnicity.

Finally, to identify the *socioeconomic status* of respondents they were asked, “How would you rate your purchasing power.” Responses ranged from “There is enough money to purchase anything” to “There is not enough money to even pay for groceries, we always have to borrow”. Socioeconomic status was coded as an ordinal variable, with 1 indicating socially vulnerable groups, and 5 indicating well-off respondents.

### **Analytical Model**

The analysis in this study includes several stages that ensure proper examination of the causal relationship. For examining the causal relationship, ordered logistic regression is used, as the dependent variable (*Trust in LEAs*) is ordinal in nature. This method aligns with previous studies that use trust in LEAs (specifically trust in police) as the dependent variable (Kääriäinen & Sirén, 2011; Macdonald & Stokes, 2006; Nix et al., 2015; Wolfe et al., 2016). The research employs three models, one that includes the key measures of the independent variable along with sociodemographic measurements used as controls, without the use of other controls in order to establish association between perception of justice and trust in LEAs. The second model includes all of the control variables and excludes the measures of perception of justice in order to identify the association between alternative determinants and trust in LEAs. Finally, the third model includes all of the variables and serves to identify whether perception of justice remains statistically significant with all control variables taken into account.

Several diagnostic tests were run to reveal that there are no harmful levels of collinearity in the models used for this research, similar to previous research (Nix et al., 2015). First, all bivariate correlations fell below an absolute value of .70. This is usually considered one of the threshold values indicating harmful collinearity. Second, all variance inflation factors (VIF) from all the models fall well below the 4.0 threshold. Finally, all condition indices are below the threshold of 30.

### **Results and Discussion**

The regression analysis for all models indicates presence of significant relationships between the dependent variable and several predictors, with an overall model *F*-statistic of 50.74, significant at  $p < .05$ , demonstrating that the model fits the data significantly better than a model with no predictors. As it stands, the model explains approximately 37.15% of the variance in the dependent variable, as indicated by the multiple *R*-squared value, with an adjusted *R*-squared of 36.47%, which accounts for the number of predictors used.

In addition, principal component regression was conducted to reduce multicollinearity and evaluate the latent structure underlying key attitudinal predictors. Six principal components extracted from twelve predictors explained approximately 66% of the variance in the original variables. Regressing trust in law enforcement on the top six components yielded an adjusted  $R^2$  of 36.6%, nearly matching the full model (Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Results of Principal Components Analysis: Principal Component Loadings*

Variable	PC1	PC2	PC3
Perception of justice	<b>−0.47</b>	−0.04	0.01
Perception of injustice in LEA	0.20	0.28	0.07
Belief in <i>Just Kazakhstan</i>	<b>−0.43</b>	0.09	0.01
Perception of change in justice	<b>−0.39</b>	0.02	0.05
Social trust	<b>−0.38</b>	−0.02	−0.06
Responsibility for justice—Government	0.07	0.00	0.17
Personal encounters with injustice	<b>0.36</b>	0.11	−0.15
Male	0.08	0.02	<b>−0.71</b>
Urban	0.22	<b>0.45</b>	−0.01
Age	0.16	<b>−0.53</b>	0.20
Education	0.02	<b>0.39</b>	<b>0.59</b>
Income	0.20	<b>−0.51</b>	0.22

*Note.* Loadings greater than .30 are highlighted in bold. PC = principal component. PC1 captures general trust/disillusionment attitudes; PC2 represents an urban/education/income dimension; PC3 primarily reflects gender and education.

The first principal component (PC1), which approximately represents an overall perception of injustice and institutional skepticism, was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = -0.43$ ,  $p < .001$ ). PC5 also showed a small but significant negative association with trust. Other components and ethnicity were not significant, suggesting that core attitudes account for most of the variation in trust levels. Results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**  
*Explained Variance by Principal Components*

Component	Standard Deviation	Proportion of Variance	Cumulative Variance
PC1	1.60	21.2%	21.2%
PC2	1.15	10.9%	32.1%
PC3	1.09	9.8%	41.9%
PC4	1.00	8.3%	50.3%
PC5	0.98	8.1%	58.4%
PC6	0.93	7.1%	65.5%

*Note.* The first six principal components explain 65.5% of the total variance in the predictors. PC = principal component.



Table 4 demonstrates the results of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models with several measures of perception of justice used as the independent variables and other variables included as controls. In general, results of the analysis lend strong support for the theory put forward in this research, while also lending support to other previously established theories. First, results demonstrate a statistically significant effect of perception of justice in society on public trust in LEAs. As an individual perceives their society to be more just, their level of trust in institutions such as LEAs tends to increase. This underscores the importance of how just the public perceives their society to be. Society whose members view it as generally unjust are subsequently less likely to trust and interact with public institutions, as in the case of law enforcement. In turn, if levels of trust are low and individuals feel wary of interacting with LEAs, it can negatively impact their performance, since a major part of their responsibilities involves interacting with citizens.

**Table 4**  
*Results of the OLS Regression Model*

Variable	Model 1 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 2 $\beta$ (SE)	Model 3 $\beta$ (SE)
(Intercept) Trust in LEAs	2.55 (0.17)***	3.25 (0.16)***	2.44 (0.18)***
Perception of justice	0.61 (0.06)***	–	0.46 (0.07)***
Perception of injustice in LEAs	–0.52 (0.06)***	–	–0.49 (0.06)***
Perception of change in justice	0.2 (0.05)***	–	0.16 (0.05)***
Belief in <i>Just Kazakhstan</i>	0.4 (0.07)***	–	0.33 (0.07)***
Social trust	–	0.25 (0.25)***	0.14 (0.03)***
Responsibility for justice— Government	–	–0.21 (–0.09)***	–0.14 (0.05)*
Personal encounter with LEAs	–	–0.56 (–0.22)***	–0.30 (0.07)***
Gender (Female = 0)	–0.18 (0.06)**	–0.21 (–0.09)***	–0.17 (0.06)**
Place of residence (Rural = 0)	–0.23 (0.06)***	–0.32 (–0.13)***	–0.19 (0.06)**
Age	–0.01 (0)***	–0.01 (–0.13)***	–0.01 (0)***
Ethnicity (Russian)	0.03 (0.07)	–0.05 (–0.02)	0.05 (0.07)
Ethnicity (Other)	0.03 (0.1)	–0.02 (–0.01)	0.06 (0.09)
Education	–0.09 (0.03)**	–0.11 (–0.08)**	–0.08 (0.03)**
Socioeconomic status	–0.05 (0.03)	–0.08 (–0.08)**	–0.04 (0.02)
$R^2$	0.35	0.25	0.38
Adjusted $R^2$	0.34	0.24	0.37
F	56.66	39.41	50.74
df	1176	1177	1173

Note.  $\beta$  = the coefficient estimate; SE = Standard Error; \*  $p \leq .05$ , \*\*  $p \leq .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .005$ .

In addition, perception of injustice in LEAs specifically has a statistically significant effect on citizens' trust in these institutions. Results suggest that an increase in public

perception of LEAs as unjust leads to a drop in trust. While such a conclusion might seem logical, it is revealing in terms of demonstrating that perception (along with actual encounters of individuals with law enforcement officers and procedural justice factors) potentially has a strong effect on public trust. It should be mentioned that among the options offered to respondents in the survey for the question “In which of the following areas do you feel a lack of justice?” LEAs were the second most chosen option after the court system. This hints at the fact that Kazakhstani citizens are wary of law enforcement and desire to see improvement in their performance when it comes to how just they are.

Other measures of the independent variable also have a statistically significant relationship with trust in LEAs. Perception of change in justice over the last 12 months has a positive effect on trust individuals have in law enforcement. More optimistic attitudes, whereby respondents view justice in society as improved positively impacts how much they are willing to trust in LEAs. It is important to mention, however, that the share of respondents that notice improvement in societal justice is not large, with the majority believing that the situation has neither improved or worsened.

Belief of individuals in the idea of *Just Kazakhstan*, which is a country-specific measure of the independent variable, also positively impacts trust in LEAs. Thus, it can be argued that a certain segment of Kazakhstanis is willing to support the idea introduced by the government, and their attitudes positively correlate with the level of trust they have in law enforcement. However, it should be expected that such support would not last long if Kazakhstanis do not witness implementation of *Just Kazakhstan* in practice. Overall, results show that measures of the independent variable have a statistically significant relationship with trust in LEAs.

Analysis results also support procedural justice theory and social capital theory, which means that the theory of perception of justice advanced in this research does not supplant, but complements previously established theories. Statistically significant relationships have been identified for all variables associated with alternative explanations, including *Responsibility for justice—Government* and *Personal encounter with LEAs*. For instance, analysis results lend support to social capital theory, as the variable *Social trust* has a positive and statistically significant relationship with the dependent variable. This suggests that individuals that have a higher sense of trust in their society and in their community will subsequently feel more trust in public institutions as well, including law enforcement. In line with previous research, it is possible to claim that communities with high levels of trust amongst its members are going to be more engaged in their community, facilitating positive and productive interactions with LEAs, which in turn would positively affect public trust in these agencies (Han et al., 2017; Macdonald & Stokes, 2006; Sun et al., 2012).

In addition, a negative and statistically significant relationship exists between public perception of the government as the party responsible for societal justice and trust in LEAs. In cases where individuals believe that the government supersedes its citizens in terms of responsibility for upholding justice, they are likely to have higher expectations of public institutions. This in turn can negatively impact the extent to which they trust these institutions.

The key measure of procedural justice, *Personal encounter with LEAs*, demonstrates a negative and statistically significant relationship with public trust in LEAs. What this suggests is that experience of encountering law enforcement officers in Kazakhstan tends to decrease the level of trust individuals have in LEAs. This is an important finding, since it suggests that certain aspects of LEA performance in the context of Kazakhstan, especially when it comes to LEA interactions with citizens, leaves individuals with a potentially negative impression of officers. In sum, the significance of the relationship between these control variables and trust in LEAs means that we cannot reject explanations offered by theories of procedural justice and collective efficacy.

Among other control variables, *Urban residence, Gender, Age, and Education* were found to be correlated with trust in LEAs to a statistically significant degree. Results suggest that women, rural residents and less educated respondents tend to trust LEAs less compared to men, urban residents and more educated respondents. Contrary to findings in the literature (Farren et al., 2018; Murray et al., 2021; Roché & Hough, 2018), analysis results suggest an inverse relationship between age and trust in LEAs, meaning that older respondents tend to trust LEAs less compared to younger individuals. At the same time, no statistically significant relationship has been identified between trust in LEAs and ethnicity or the socioeconomic status of the respondents. Such results suggest that these factors do not influence the dependent variable in the context of the model developed for this research. However, different reasons might be behind such a result, which could be due to a lack of variability, measurement issues, or genuine absence of effects.

It is important to acknowledge several limitations encountered in this research, particularly in the development of the survey questions. Although most factors identified in previous studies were considered, certain aspects such as specific initiatives of the LEAs were omitted in order to avoid a drawn-out and lengthy survey. Consequently, only the most critical determinants were considered and included. Further research of any alternative explanations behind public trust in LEAs is warranted and could deepen our understanding of this issue in general and specifically within the context of Kazakhstan.

Moreover, while relying on a robust methodology utilized in previous research, further use of findings in this research would need to take into account that research results could be specific to the context of Kazakhstan. The cultural, social, and political environment of the Central Asian republic may influence the generalizability of these results to other settings. Future research should consider comparative studies across different countries to determine the extent to which these findings are applicable elsewhere.

## Conclusion

In summary, this analysis has identified several key factors that significantly impact the trust citizens have towards law enforcement in Kazakhstan, with implications for understanding how public perception of justice affects the degree of public trust in

these institutions. Examining the broader societal context and specific perceptions of justice within law enforcement revealed that individuals who view their society as just are more likely to trust these institutions, while negative perceptions of justice, particularly within LEAs, lead to a significant decline in public trust. Analysis of control variables aligns with and supports existing theories of procedural justice and social capital, and the research overall offers new insights into the unique dynamics at play in post-Soviet, non-Western societies like Kazakhstan. The results suggest that fostering trust in LEAs requires not only addressing performance and procedural fairness but also improving the public's overall perception of justice. Future research in other nations, especially those where the government is attempting reforms of justice, would allow further insight into the relationship between public perception of justice and their trust in various public institutions, including law enforcement.

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