

“Assessing the impact of transparency in asset recovery on public trust: Evidence from Kazakhstan”

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ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TRANSPARENCY IN ASSET RECOVERY ON PUBLIC TRUST: EVIDENCE FROM KAZAKHSTAN

Abstract

The relevance of this study stems from the global challenge of illicit capital flight and the urgent need to strengthen public trust in state institutions in countries pursuing anti-corruption reforms, particularly Kazakhstan. There is a critical need to evaluate the effectiveness of transparency mechanisms as a factor in legitimizing state policy. The study aims to assess whether transparency in asset recovery processes contributes to strengthening public trust in Kazakhstan's state institutions, using evidence from public opinion, expert assessments, and media analysis. To achieve this goal, in 2023 a mixed-methods design was applied, combining a sociological survey ($N = 1,383$ respondents across all regions), 15 in-depth interviews with experts from government, academia, and civil society, and a content analysis of more than 300,000 media and social media mentions from 2022 to 2023. The results indicate a low level of perceived transparency of the Asset Recovery Committee, with an average score of 1.61 on a 3-point scale, which is statistically below the "partially transparent" level (t -test, $p < 0.05$). Correlation analysis identified a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.793$) between public awareness of illicit capital outflows and knowledge of the Committee's functions. SWOT and PEST analyses revealed structural, legal, and technological barriers to ensuring transparency in asset recovery processes. The study concludes that a balanced approach to information disclosure – respecting investigative confidentiality while enabling public oversight – is essential for building trust. The findings provide practical guidance for policymakers in improving transparency mechanisms, enhancing anti-corruption reforms, and strengthening public administration in Kazakhstan.

Keywords

asset recovery, transparency, public trust, corruption, Kazakhstan

JEL Classification

H11, K42, D73

INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, transparency and accountability in public administration are cornerstones, especially in areas related to public finance and regulatory bodies. These principles form the basis for public oversight, building trust, and ensuring that authorities are held responsible for their actions (Adil et al., 2022). A lack of transparent governance typically leads to diminished public trust and heightened suspicions of corruption (Kuandykov et al., 2021).

The problem of illicitly withdrawn capital poses a significant challenge for many countries worldwide, particularly for developing nations rich in natural resources, such as Kazakhstan. Illicit capital flight violates national laws, inflicts serious damage on the economy, and undermines the foundations of state institutions. In the public consciousness of Kazakhstan, this issue is strongly associated with large-scale corruption and the misappropriation of national wealth.

Recognizing the severity of this challenge, the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted the Law “On the Return of Illegally Acquired Assets to the State.” This legislation explicitly mandates transparency and accountability through information disclosure, operational analysis, and legislative improvement, establishing “openness, transparency, and accountability” as foundational principles for asset recovery (Adilet Legal Information System, 2023). However, legal and financial mechanisms alone are insufficient to effectively counter illicit financial flows.

In this context, a gap exists between the state’s declared policy of transparency in the sensitive area of asset recovery and its actual perception by society. The insufficient study of how informational openness influences public trust amidst incomplete institutional reforms creates uncertainty for both government bodies and civil society. Thus, the core scientific problem lies in the insufficiently studied relationship between transparency in asset recovery and public trust in state institutions. This problem is compounded by the gap between the state’s declared policy of openness and its perception by society, as well as by structural and institutional barriers that complicate effective communication between the government and the public.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

The study of illicit financial flows (IFFs) and transparency in public administration is crucial for understanding how corruption and weak governance undermine state legitimacy. This literature review situates the present research within the broader scholarly debates on sustainable development, asset recovery, and public trust, while simultaneously highlighting the specific gaps related to the experience of Kazakhstan.

Transparency and accountability are interconnected and fundamental principles that underpin modern public administration and the concept of the rule of law (Reniutz-Ursoiu & Musan, 2010). Transparency is defined as ensuring the public has unfettered access to timely and reliable information concerning the decisions and performance of the public sector (Armstrong, 2005; Hallak & Poisson, 2007). Accountability, in turn, constitutes the obligation of public officials to report on the use of state resources and to be answerable for their actions (Armstrong, 2005; Sari & Muslim, 2023; Corporate Reporting Dialogue et al., 2019). These principles are codependent: transparency without accountability is rendered meaningless, while accountability is inconceivable without transparency, as it requires the necessary information to evaluate official conduct (Armstrong, 2005; Reniutz-Ursoiu & Musan, 2010).

Despite this conceptual synergy, the linear causal relationship wherein transparency is assumed to automatically generate accountability has been increasingly questioned in contemporary academic literature. Fox (2007) posits that this assumption is more of a normative ideal than an empirically substantiated fact. Formal mechanisms do not always translate into genuine accountability; without meaningful information and sanctioning mechanisms, transparency can become merely symbolic (Jashari & Pepaj, 2018). To address this, Fox (2007) proposes a typology distinguishing between “clear” and “opaque” transparency. To effectively curb corruption and build trust, “clear” transparency, which provides accessible and reliable information, must be combined with “hard” accountability, which entails sanctions, legal remedies, and active citizen participation (Ackerman, 2004; Fung & O’Rourke, 2000; Gaventa, 2006; Grindle, 2004).

A theoretical understanding of public trust also requires a delineation of key concepts. Trust in government is recognized as a vital component for policy implementation and social cohesion (Levi & Stoker, 2000; Putnam, 1995). A lack of transparency and perceived corruption are among the most potent drivers of distrust (Hardin, 2002; Nye et al., 1997). A critical distinction must be made between trust as a citizen’s subjective judgment and trustworthiness as an objective attribute of government, which encompasses both competence and a commitment to the public interest (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Transparent governance, in

turn, fosters legitimacy and positive perceptions of state institutions (Bouckaert & Van de Walle, 2003; Lægread & Christensen, 2005), a relationship of particular relevance in transitional economies (Torgler, 2004).

Corruption, defined as the abuse of public office for private gain (Rose-Ackerman, 1999), is a central challenge in public administration that directly fuels illicit financial flows. Its causes are rooted in deep systemic factors, such as the level of economic development and historical legacies (Treisman, 2000). Accordingly, the effectiveness of transparency in combating corruption is contingent upon specific institutional and political factors (Kaufmann & Vicente, 2011; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010).

Illicit financial flows represent a major impediment to sustainable development, draining public resources and eroding institutional credibility. Scholars observe that money laundering and capital flight distort financial systems and weaken governance mechanisms (Eisenberg, 2017). According to Global Financial Integrity, developing countries lose over \$1 trillion annually to IFFs (International Finance Corporation, 2024; Kar & Freitas, 2012; Wesberry, 1997). These flows are facilitated by trade misinvoicing, tax evasion, and illicit asset transfers, often enabled by weak legal frameworks and limited transparency (Kar et al., 2015; Sharman, 2010). Counteracting them requires robust international cooperation and regulatory oversight, as emphasized by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and scholars such as Reuter and Truman (2004).

Asset recovery has emerged as a key instrument in the fight against IFFs. International frameworks, such as the Stolen Asset Recovery (StAR) Initiative and guidelines from Brun et al. (2011), provide comprehensive methodologies for tracing, freezing, and repatriating stolen assets, which are often concealed through complex schemes involving shell corporations (Findley et al., 2014). The effectiveness of these frameworks, however, depends on balancing efficiency with the protection of human rights (Alldrige, 2003) and on the institutional capacity of national systems to implement complex international standards (Chaikin & Sharman, 2009; Kofele-Kale, 2008).

The proliferation of digital technologies has significantly enhanced the potential for transparency and civic oversight. The development of e-government platforms and automated financial control systems has expanded the toolkit for creating meaningful transparency (Lyrio et al., 2018; Heeks, 2003). Research on Kazakhstan indicates that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can bolster government transparency and citizen trust (Nurkey et al., 2021). Nevertheless, despite legislative innovations such as the 2023 Asset Recovery Law, challenges related to information accessibility and quality persist. Institutional opacity and weak engagement with civil society remain significant obstacles (Home Office & UK Government, 2022), creating a gap in the literature concerning the direct impact of asset recovery transparency on public trust in developing economies.

In summary, the literature review confirms that transparency is a necessary but insufficient condition for building trust and combating corruption. Its effectiveness is contingent upon robust accountability mechanisms, technological capacity, and civic participation. This study addresses a gap in the literature by examining Kazakhstan's asset recovery initiative as a unique case for empirically testing these theoretical propositions.

This study aims to assess whether transparency in asset recovery processes contributes to strengthening public trust in Kazakhstan's state institutions. Based on the theoretical framework and the gaps identified in previous research, four hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: *Increased public access to information regarding asset recovery processes positively correlates with higher levels of trust in state institutions, since transparency provides citizens with grounds for more informed evaluation of government actions.*
- H2: *Greater transparency is expected to reduce public perceptions of corruption, as the disclosure of procedures and outcomes can limit speculation about selective or politically motivated practices.*
- H3: *Enhanced transparency is hypothesized to contribute to an increase in the institutional*

legitimacy of government bodies responsible for asset recovery, thereby reinforcing their credibility in the eyes of society.

H4: The effectiveness of transparency in fostering trust is assumed to be mediated by broader civic engagement and the presence of accountability mechanisms, which ensure that disclosed information is both reliable and actionable.

2. METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design to examine the link between transparency in asset recovery and public trust in Kazakhstan. The research was conducted in several sequential stages.

First, expert interviews were carried out to capture in-depth perspectives from stakeholders in government, academia, and civil society. A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted in person and online, transcribed, and thematically analyzed.

Second, content analysis was applied to evaluate the information environment surrounding asset recovery. This included 67 official publications and media reports, as well as over 300,000 social media mentions collected through monitoring platforms.

Third, a sociological survey was administered from May to December 2023, covering 1,383 respondents aged 18+ across all regions of Kazakhstan. A mixed-mode approach was applied, combining offline interviews with an online questionnaire. Respondents'

demographic profile (gender, age, education, and place of residence) is presented in Figure 1.

Fourth, SWOT and PEST analyses were performed to contextualize the findings within broader political, economic, social, and technological factors.

Finally, statistical analysis was applied to survey data. A one-sample *t*-test assessed whether the perceived transparency of the Asset Recovery Committee differed from the benchmark level of "partial transparency" (set at 2 on a 3-point scale). Pearson correlation analysis was used to test the relationship between citizens' awareness of illicit capital outflows and their knowledge of the Committee's functions.

This sequence ensured both qualitative depth and quantitative rigor, while combining multiple sources of primary and secondary data.

3. RESULTS

Analysis of 15 expert opinions, including those from a public discussion (Elmedia Kazakhstan, 2023), revealed several key themes. First, experts noted the absence of formalized mechanisms for systematically publishing information on returned assets and the legal grounds for their confiscation. Second, the existing legal and institutional framework for asset recovery was described as underdeveloped. Third, all interviewees stressed the critical need for clear and regular communication with the public. Finally, experts advocated for the adoption of international best practices and greater involvement of civil society in monitoring (Table 1 and Figure 2).

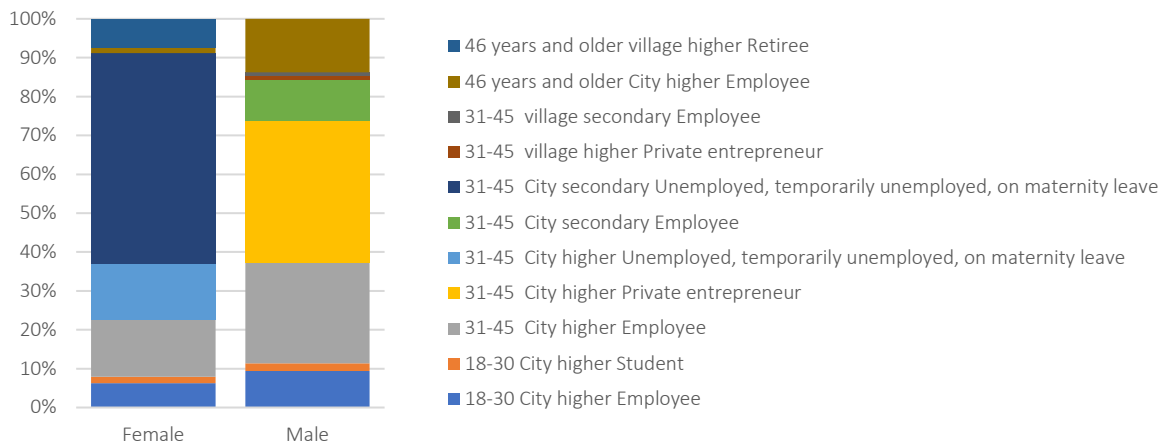


Figure 1. Demographic profile of survey respondents (N = 1,383)



Figure 2. Participants of the expert survey

Table 1. Thematic summary of expert interview responses

Theme	Illustrative Insight
Transparency	Committee operates in secrecy; public is left uninformed
Legal Gaps	Lack of mechanism for asset declaration and audit
Political Dynamics	Recovery decisions appear selective or influenced
Communication	No standard public disclosure; ad hoc statements
Recommendations	Use of digital dashboards, international audit, NGO engagement

A quantitative web search on Google.kz in 2020–2023 identified 67 relevant publications. Of these, 77% were news articles, 4% were NGO publications, and 5% were official government statements (Figure 3).

The data indicate that over 302,000 social media mentions (September 2022 – December 2023) using YouScan showed that 48% of mentions had a negative or skeptical tone, 40% were neutral, and only 12% were positive (Figures 4 and 5).

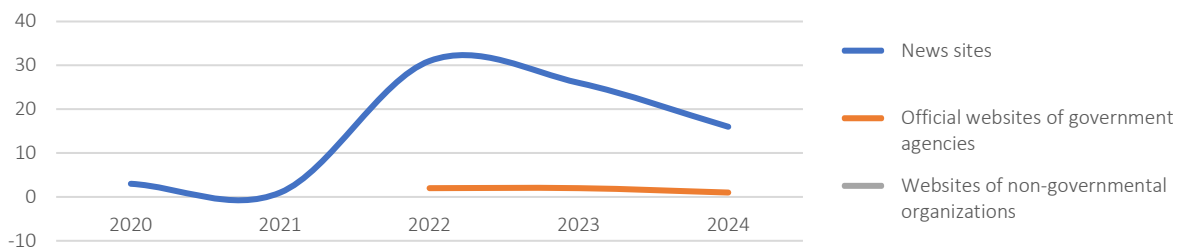


Figure 3. Number of mentions in Google Kazakhstan by keywords “Return of illegally withdrawn capital” (77 mentions on Google)

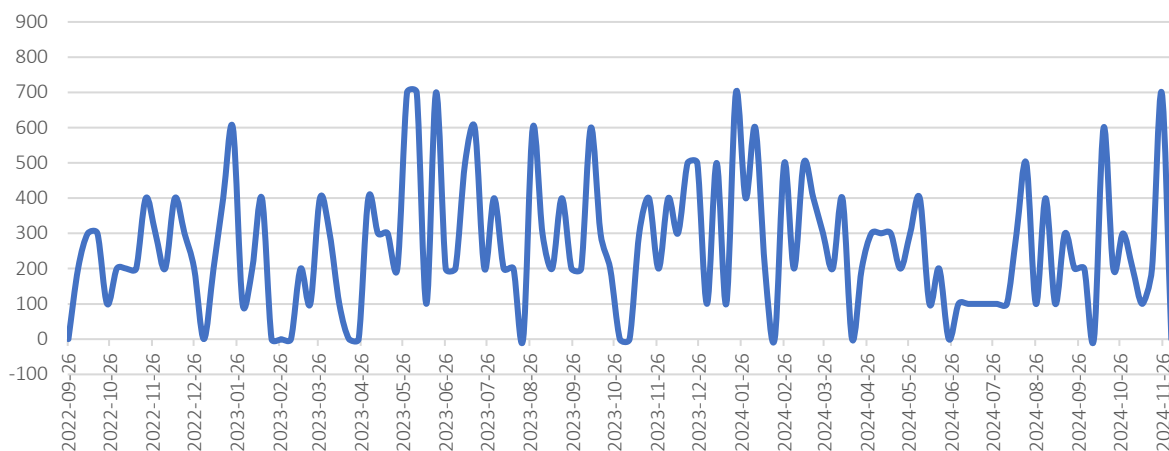


Figure 4. Frequency of mentions related to asset recovery (YouScan data)

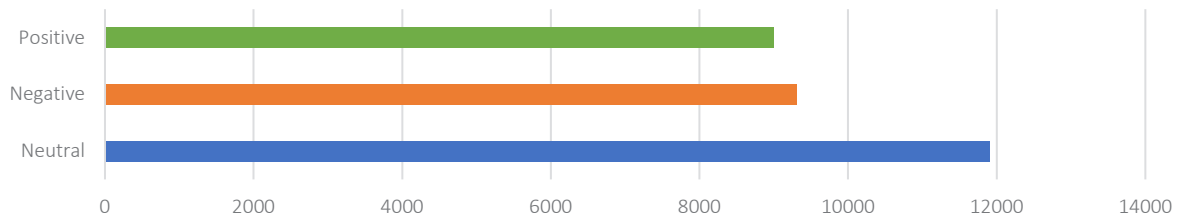


Figure 5. Sentiment analysis of public discourse on asset recovery (YouScan)

The results of the analysis of messenger platforms (BrandAnalytics) revealed an even higher proportion of negative and sarcastic messages (Figures 6, 7, and 8). Discussions were primarily concentrated in major cities: Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent (over 60% of mentions).

A survey of 1,383 respondents showed that while most citizens are aware of the problem of illicit asset withdrawal, only 15% consider the work of the Asset Recovery Committee to be fully transparent, 61% view it as partially transparent, and 24% see it as completely non-transparent (Figures 9, 10, and 11).

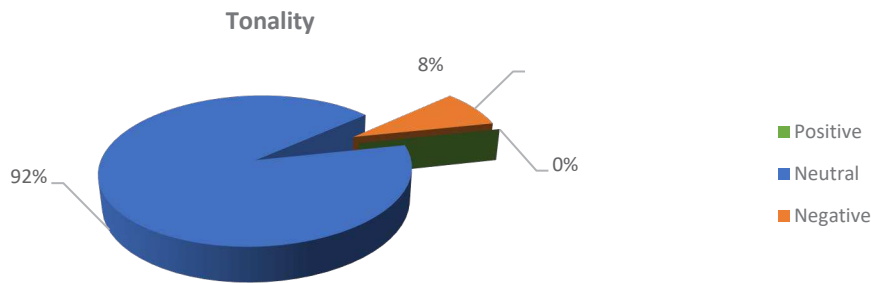


Figure 6. Tone of publications in messengers related to asset recovery (BrandAnalytics)

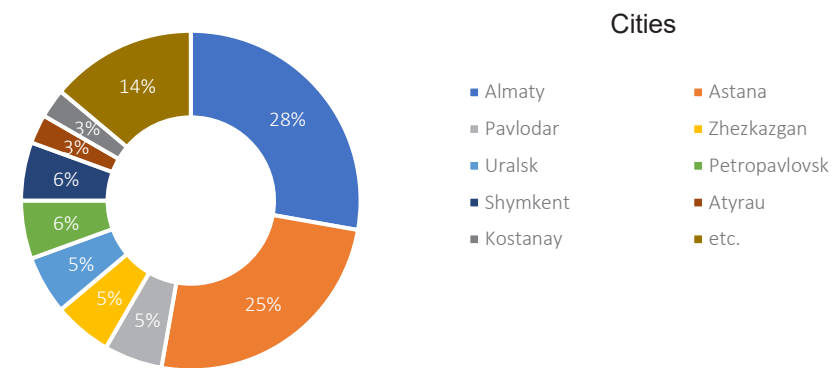


Figure 7. Geographic distribution of asset recovery discussions (BrandAnalytics)

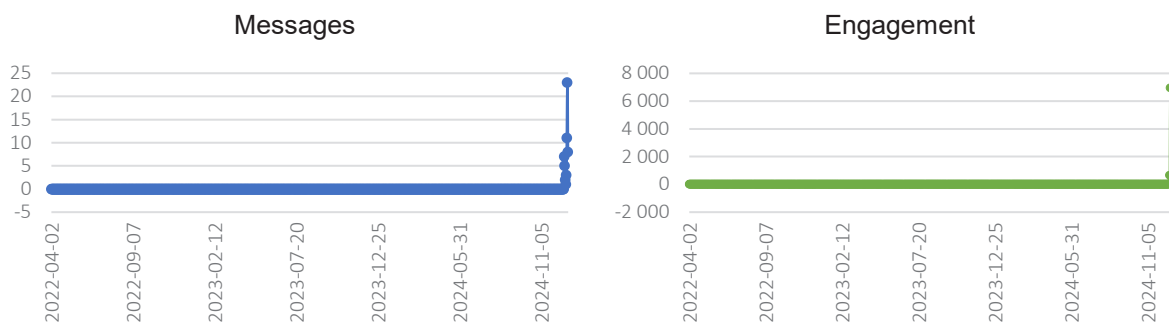


Figure 8. Engagement by platform type (social networks vs. messengers)

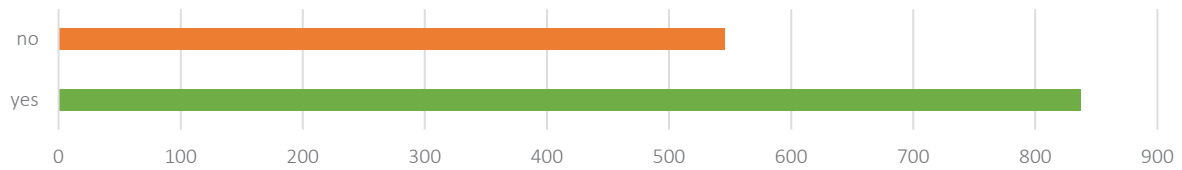


Figure 9. Public awareness of illicit asset withdrawal

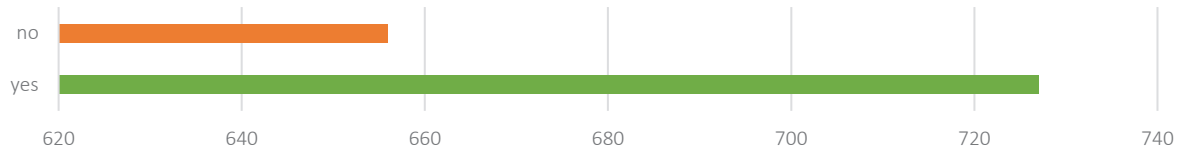


Figure 10. Awareness of the Asset Recovery Committee and its functions

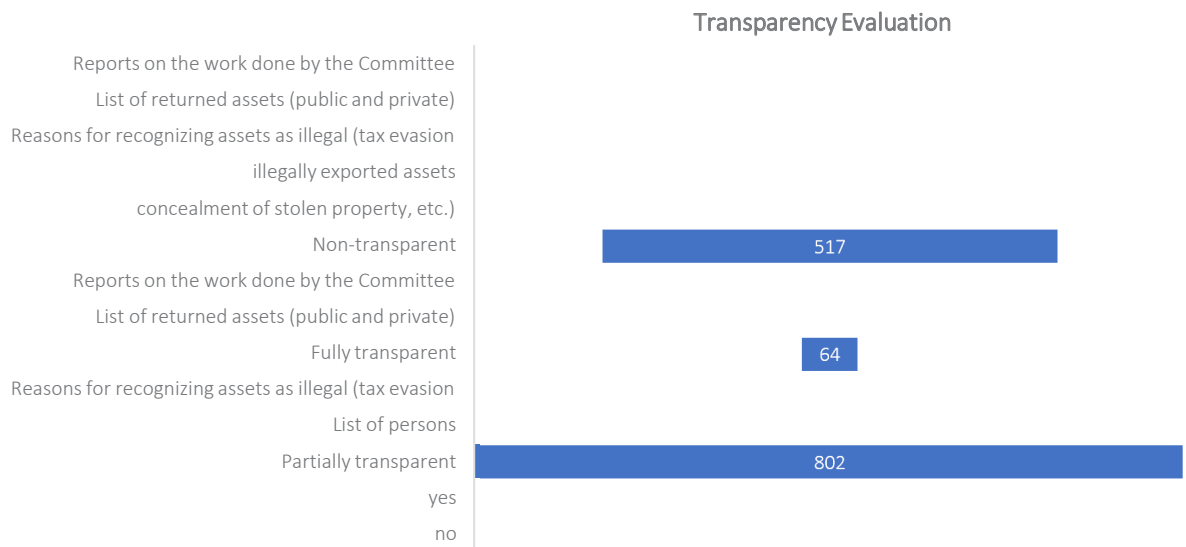


Figure 11. Perceived transparency of the Committee

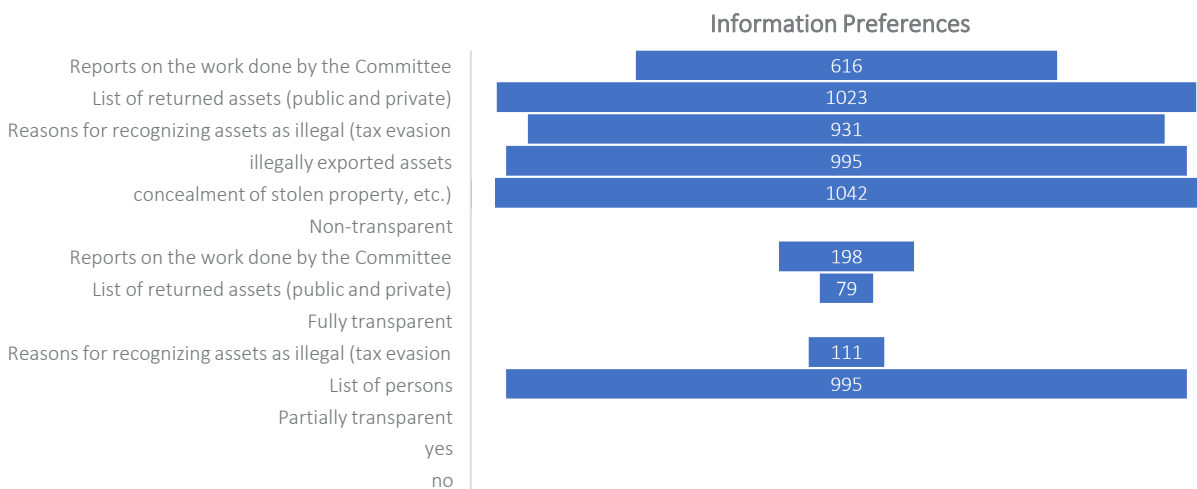


Figure 12. Citizens' preference for receiving information

Table 2. SWOT analysis data

Strengths	Weaknesses
High public demand for accountability and justice	Lack of standardized formats for reporting recovery data
Widespread support for publication of asset-related information	Inconsistent and irregular public communication from state bodies
Alignment with principles of good governance and anti-corruption	Legal uncertainty regarding the limits of disclosure and confidentiality
Opportunities	Threats
Creation of a centralized digital platform for open reporting	Risk of breaching investigative secrecy or legal rights of individuals
Use of media and social networks for citizen engagement and trust-building	Potential manipulation of disclosed data or politicization of recovery process
Institutional partnerships with civil society for independent monitoring	Information overload and misinterpretation due to technical complexity

Table 3. PEST analysis data

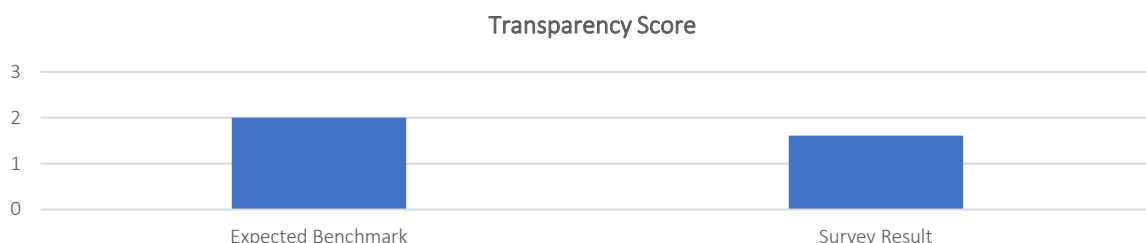
Political factors	Economic factors
Clear political mandate for asset recovery reform	Public awareness of the financial harm from illicit capital flight
Growing demand for government accountability and rule of law	Perceived link between transparency and improved investment climate
Legislative initiatives supporting information disclosure	Need to restore fiscal trust and attract international cooperation
Social factors	Technological factors
Strong civic interest in anti-corruption and justice	High penetration of social media and messenger platforms
Varying levels of legal literacy and data interpretation	Lack of unified digital infrastructure for publishing asset data
Concerns about fairness, selective justice, and legal protection	Need for user-friendly platforms to ensure accessibility and inclusiveness

Most respondents expressed a desire for detailed information, including the names of individuals involved in capital flight (82%), the value of recovered assets (78%), and the methods of recovery (63%). The preferred channels for receiving information were media outlets (62%), social networks (54%), and official government websites (41%) (Figure 12).

The SWOT analysis (Table 2) identified strengths (high public demand for justice), weaknesses (lack of standardized reporting formats), opportunities (creation of a digital reporting platform), and threats (risk of breaching investigative secrecy).

The PEST analysis (Table 3) indicated that political factors (political will for reform) and social factors (strong civic interest) are favorable for increasing transparency, but technological barriers (lack of a unified digital infrastructure) and varying levels of digital literacy are constraining factors.

The average transparency rating for the Asset Recovery Committee was 1.61 on a 3-point scale (Figure 13). A one-sample *t*-test showed this value to be statistically significantly lower than the benchmark of 2.0 (“partially transparent”) at $p < 0.05$. This confirms that the public generally perceives the Committee’s work as insufficiently transparent.



Note: The results confirm that citizens perceive the Asset Recovery Committee’s activities as significantly less transparent than the minimum acceptable level.

Figure 13. Comparison of the expected transparency level (benchmark = 2.00) and the actual average score from the survey (1.61)

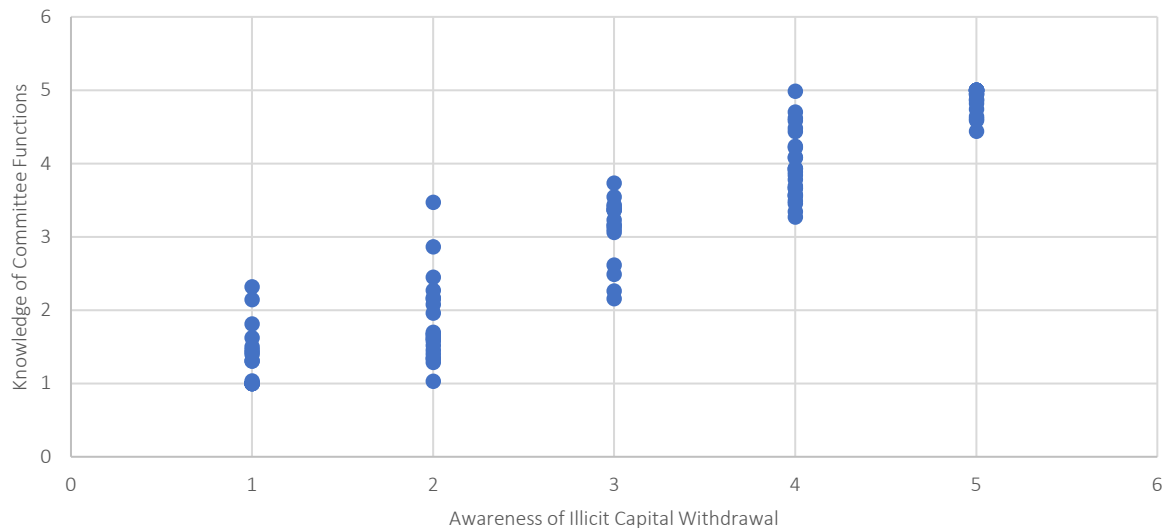


Figure 14. Correlation between awareness and institutional knowledge

Pearson correlation analysis (Figure 14) revealed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.793$) between respondents' awareness of the illicit capital withdrawal problem and their knowledge of the Asset Recovery Committee's work. This indicates that the more informed citizens are about the broader issue, the better they understand the role of the responsible institutions.

The findings provide empirical support for the study's hypotheses. H1 is confirmed, as correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship ($r = 0.793$) between public awareness of illicit asset withdrawal and knowledge of the Asset Recovery Committee's functions. H2 is only partially supported: while social media analysis shows a strong association between low transparency and negative perceptions of corruption, the survey results indicate that distrust persists even among citizens with partial awareness. H3 is validated through survey data, which demonstrate that limited transparency undermines institutional legitimacy, with the Committee's average score (1.61) falling significantly below the benchmark of partial transparency (2.0). H4 is confirmed by SWOT and PEST analyses, which highlighted that the impact of transparency on trust is mediated by accountability mechanisms, civic engagement, and technological capacity.

In summary, the results show that transparency in asset recovery processes remains insufficient in Kazakhstan. Citizens demand more detailed and regular information, experts stress institutional re-

forms, and digital monitoring reveals widespread skepticism. At the same time, the analyses indicate that improving transparency (if supported by strong accountability and communication practices) can significantly enhance public trust and the perceived legitimacy of state institutions.

4. DISCUSSION

The empirical findings collectively support the central theoretical assumption of this study: transparency in asset recovery processes is a critical determinant of public trust in Kazakhstan.

First, the gap between high public awareness of illicit capital outflows and low knowledge of the Asset Recovery Committee's activities points to a serious deficit in official communication. This void is filled by media-driven and speculative narratives, which is corroborated by the predominance of journalistic sources and the skeptical tone on social media. This supports Hypothesis H1: the lack of accessible and clear official information impedes the formation of trust. The result is consistent with Corporate Reporting Dialogue et al. (2019) and Sari and Muslim (2023), who emphasize the importance of transparency for public oversight.

Second, expert interviews provide deeper insight into the institutional causes of this communication gap. Despite political will, implementation is undermined by a lack of coordinated procedures and legal clarity.

Experts stressed that without fundamental transparency, even legitimate asset recovery actions may be perceived as selective and politically motivated. This finding relates directly to Hypothesis H2 and supports the arguments of Rose-Ackerman (1999) and Treisman (2000) that opacity breeds distrust.

Third, the low average transparency score of the Committee (1.61 out of 3) quantitatively confirms public dissatisfaction. At the same time, the strong demand for detailed information (names, amounts, methods) demonstrates readiness for constructive engagement. This supports Hypothesis H3, showing that greater informational openness could significantly enhance the legitimacy of government bodies. These results also empirically validate Fox's (2007) concept of "clear" versus "opaque" transparency: Kazakhstan's current approach leans toward the latter, appearing more symbolic than systemic.

Finally, the data highlight risks associated with ill-conceived transparency measures. Experts warned

about potential violations of procedural justice and reputational harm, underscoring the importance of Hypothesis H4. The effectiveness of transparency is mediated by accountability mechanisms and legal safeguards. Without these, transparency initiatives risk unintended negative effects, echoing the concerns of Alldridge (2003) and Home Office & UK Government (2022).

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that transparency in asset recovery processes is both a determinant of trust and a source of potential institutional risk if poorly managed. The findings highlight the dual nature of transparency: while greater openness can strengthen legitimacy and citizen engagement, its effectiveness depends on the presence of safeguards and accountability mechanisms. These insights contribute to the broader academic debate on governance and corruption control, situating Kazakhstan's experience within international discussions on the role of transparency in state–society relations.

CONCLUSION

This study examined whether transparency in asset recovery processes influences public trust in Kazakhstan's state institutions. The results demonstrate that despite strong public demand for justice and accountability, the current level of transparency is perceived as insufficient, with the Asset Recovery Committee receiving an average score of only 1.61 on a 3-point scale. At the same time, statistical analysis confirmed a strong correlation ($r = 0.793$) between citizens' awareness of the problem of illicit capital outflows and their knowledge of the Committee's functions.

From these findings, an important conclusion emerges: legislative measures alone are not enough to strengthen trust. Without a systematic and technologically supported framework for public communication, asset recovery risks being viewed as selective or politically motivated. Transparency, therefore, is not optional but a necessary precondition for the credibility of the state's anti-corruption agenda.

Future research should expand on these findings in several ways. First, a comparative assessment of different information disclosure models (such as full anonymization versus partial disclosure) could provide insights into how varying approaches affect public trust. Second, longitudinal studies would be valuable for tracing the dynamics of public perceptions as digital monitoring platforms and institutional practices evolve. Third, closer examination of the role of civil society as an intermediary in translating complex financial information into accessible formats could highlight how citizen engagement mediates the trust-building process.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

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