

# **Strategic Reputation Management as a Driver of Public Sector Innovation**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the multifaceted role of organizational reputation in public administration, focusing on its potential to drive innovation within Kazakhstan's unique political and administrative context. Innovation, defined as the application of novel ideas, processes, or technologies to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and public value, is increasingly critical in transforming public sector organizations to meet modern societal demands. The article underscores the importance of managing organizational reputation as a strategic asset that fosters trust, legitimacy, and citizen engagement—key prerequisites for successful innovation in governance.

Through a synthesis of existing literature and empirical insights, the study identifies innovative approaches to reputation- building, including leveraging digital communication platforms, improving the competencies of civil servants, and adopting global best practices. Special attention is given to the challenges of adapting corporate reputation strategies to public administration, considering the sector's non-competitive and politically sensitive nature.

The findings highlight practical measures, such as enhanced training programs for civil servants, standardized public relations frameworks, and ethical governance reforms, which can collectively improve the reputation of public institutions and support broader public sector innovation. This research contributes to the growing discourse on reputation management as a vital enabler of transparency, accountability, and modernization in public administration, with implications for both developed and developing countries.

**Key words:** reputation, public innovation, public administration, open state, civil servants.

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, increasing evidence has emerged that public sector organizations recognize the importance of creating a favorable reputation, which they consider an integral part of their strategic goals (Carpenter and Krause, 2011; Maor, 2007). The concept of reputation encompasses a symbolic representation of an organization, including its capabilities, goals, history, and objectives, and is deeply embedded in the cognitive structures of various stakeholders, ranging from service recipients to the media, policy experts, and ordinary citizens (Carpenter, 2010). Consequently, stakeholders do not perceive an organization as a whole but

rather form a fragmented view of its effectiveness, giving public structures a certain degree of freedom in strategically shaping their reputation (Carpenter and Krause, 2011). Reputation, by its very nature, represents an objectively formed aggregate of opinions about an organization held by stakeholders directly or indirectly connected to it. It takes the form of an organization's "good name" and is shaped by numerous factors subject to varying assessments (Carpenter, 2010). This interdisciplinary concept draws on knowledge from diverse fields, including marketing, social psychology, economics, and decision science.

Despite the acknowledged importance of reputation as a key indicator of organizational effectiveness, there is a noticeable gap in attention to the conceptualization and development of the public apparatus's reputation in the context of public administration, as research in this area is less developed compared to studies of corporate reputation. While it is argued that reputation management strategies are universally applicable to any organization regardless of sector, size, or core mission, these strategies are generally based on notions of a "firm" or "company." Additionally, the unique features of government institutions, such as their non-competitive nature and dependence on political conditions, may complicate the application of traditional reputation approaches designed for the private sector.

While previous researches have focused on specific aspects of the reputation of public institutions, the goal of this study is to propose a more targeted approach to reputation-building in the context of public administration. The study suggests methodological foundations and approaches to enhancing reputation that are more flexible and adaptable to public administration contexts. These approaches account for the dynamic and multifaceted nature of public sector organizations' reputation in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Many states and public figures are concerned about citizens' dissatisfaction with public sector services and the image of the public apparatus as a whole (Van De Walle, 2007). In this regard, the formation of an effective, accountable, and "listening" government can help to improve the public perception of the state apparatus and strengthen its trust (Van De Walle, 2010).

Despite the practical importance of reputation for public organizations and the wide range of strategies for managing it, reputation does not receive adequate attention. This is particularly relevant in Kazakhstan, where the legacy of Soviet administrative practices is evident in the public administration system, specifically in slow and formalized bureaucratic procedures (Ayubayeva et al, 2022; OECD, 2007). At the same time, the basis for integrating Kazakh society into the global community should be public service, whose main principles must include democracy and legitimacy, as well as professionalism, competence, initiative, honesty, and determination (Aueshova et al, 2019).

Kazakhstan has a unique political and administrative system that combines elements of a presidential republic with authoritarian features. This creates a specific context in which the reputation of the public apparatus can be shaped and perceived differently than in Western democracies, which have been the focus of previous researches on reputation.

According to the annual report of Freedom House for 2024, public administration in Kazakhstan remains authoritarian despite government declarations of political reforms aimed at democratization, increasing public trust, and building a "Fair Kazakhstan" and a "Listening State." These conclusions are based on an assessment of the democratic nature of Kazakhstan's public system and the independence, efficiency, and accountability of its legislative and executive branches (Kazakhstan scores 1.26 out of 7 possible points, with 7 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 1 the lowest) (Freedomhouse, 2024).

Kazakhstan became the first middle power recognized as such due to a combination of its economic strength and strategic approach to international relations (The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 2024). This creates specific challenges and opportunities for forming effective public administration both nationally and regionally.

Over the past 10 years, the Republic of Kazakhstan has established a solid legal framework in the field of anticorruption legislation, public service and administration (Bokayev et al, 2023). Among other goals, this legislation is also aimed at building a positive reputation for the public apparatus. Meanwhile, in our opinion, it should be improved taking into account modern changes related to the application of innovations in the field of public administration.

As defined in the *Oslo Manual* 2018, "An innovation is a new or improved product or process that differs significantly from the unit's previous products or processes and that has been made available to potential users (product) or brought into use by the unit (process)" (Glor, 2021; OECD/Eurostat, 2018). In this context, the reputation of government agencies is considered as an innovative tool for increasing the trust of citizens, improving the communication of civil servants, as well as increasing the level of transparency in government agencies.

### ***Literature review***

In most cases, textbooks and manuals on managing corporate reputation are taken as a basis for understanding organizational reputation management. Despite the declared universality of reputation management strategies—applicable to any organization, regardless of sector, size, or primary mission—these strategies typically originate from concepts like "corporation," "firm," or "company" (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012).

While corporations prioritize managing their reputation to optimize profitability, public sector organizations face the challenge of attracting diverse economic, political, and social stakeholders to serve the public interest (Wæraas, 2020). Maintaining a reputation among multiple stakeholders requires multifaceted efforts, where achieving absolute success is often elusive. Nevertheless, public managers at all levels of organizational hierarchy make significant efforts to strengthen reputation, striving for greater decision-making autonomy (Carpenter, 2001).

A robust reputation not only serves as a competitive advantage, leading to increased sales, profits, and productivity (Rhee and Valdez, 2009), but it also enhances trust in public organizations. Moreover, it represents valuable political capital, enabling organizations to secure support, achieve decision-making independence, and recruit and retain talented personnel (Carpenter, 2002).

Participation in reputation management helps organizations achieve outstanding results, and/or strengthen trust in administrative structures and participants (Carmeli and Tishler, 2004; Capelos et al, 2015; Christensen and Laegreid, 2020). Conversely, a poor reputation can have severe negative consequences, potentially leading to a legitimacy crisis or even the dissolution of a public institution (Etienne, 2015; Luoma-aho, 2007). Therefore, government leaders must carefully consider stakeholders, participate in relevant meetings, seek expert consultations, or intensify efforts in strategic communication (Carpenter, 2004).

In recent decades, scholars from various disciplines have increasingly recognized the importance of reputation's influence on the public sector, resulting in growing academic interest in this area (Overman et al, 2020). Reputation serves as a lens for understanding public organizations' actions in response to threats and opportunities (Maor, 2007; Rimkutė, 2018). Furthermore, reputation is highlighted as an intangible asset of paramount importance for public organizations (Carpenter, 2001; Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter and Krause, 2011). Bækkeskov (2017) emphasizes the critical role of reputation in building and maintaining trust, while Carpenter (2010) underscores the prestige and status benefits conferred by a strong reputation. Considering reputation from the perspective of public sector in Kazakhstan, a good reputation of political appointees can serve as one of the tools for a successful career (Bokayev et al, 2022).

Recent studies indicate that institutions across various sectors and levels in several OECD countries, such as ministries and central government bodies (Luoma-Aho, 2007; Maor, 2007; Carpenter, 2010), local government entities (Ryan, 2007; Nielsen and Salomonsen, 2012), educational institutions (Chapleo, 2004; Gustafsson, 2011; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2008), and public health agencies (Arnold et al, 2003), have recognized the potential benefits of a good reputation.

For practitioners, the central question is how government organizations can develop relationships with stakeholders to create a positive reputation. Public sector leaders increasingly acknowledge reputation management as a strategic imperative (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012; Wæraas and Maor, 2015).

In this regard, the results section of this study offers recommendations that serve as a foundation for promoting the reputation of public administration bodies in Kazakhstan.

## **Methodology**

The study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines theoretical and empirical analysis methods to explore the concept of organizational reputation in the context of public administration. The primary goal of the article is to study the role of reputation management, as well as the identification of reputation management strategies in the public sector.

To achieve the objectives mentioned above, the following key tasks are formulated:

- Conducting a literature review;
- Examining the range of issues related to the concept, goals, and functions of public organizations' reputation;
- Developing recommendations for improving legislation aimed at enhancing the reputation of public administration bodies.

The methodological basis of the study relies on general scientific methods of cognition, emphasizing the study of phenomena in their continuous development, interconnection, and interdependence. Widely recognized fundamental research in the general theory of reputation formation, encompassing both the public and private sectors, was utilized. The study also includes a review of scientific works from the past two decades focusing on reputation- building.

To conduct a comprehensive analysis of reputation literature over the past two decades, the systematic review method was applied. This approach facilitated the identification of the existing body of knowledge and provided insights into the scientific community's perspectives on reputation. The choice of systematic review was made due to its transparency and reproducibility in presenting the current state of knowledge.

The theoretical basis for issues related to the reputation of public authorities was established through systematic theoretical and empirical research in the field of public administration. Moreover, the concept of reputation was applied not only for gaining scientific knowledge but also in the practical context of public administration.

The study included an analysis of the regulatory framework of the Republic of Kazakhstan relevant to the topic, which served as the basis for formulating proposals to improve legislation in the studied area.

Thus, the research plan incorporates a wealth of data to understand the diversity of perspectives and the understanding of what gives significant importance to the reputation of public bodies over time.

## **Results and Discussion**

The process of reputation- building in public administration is complex and uncertain, with even minor missteps or a lack of proper interaction with its components potentially undermining years of work, leading to significant negative consequences for the organization's future activities. Ineffective management of this process can result in risks or missed opportunities for the public sector. Public sector leaders must be prepared to respond swiftly to emerging events to maintain a favorable reputation for public bodies.

The necessity of reputation-oriented public administration lies not in developing a universal approach but rather in exploring the factors underlying reputation-building applicable to any public institution and its management personnel. Changes in the structure of the public

sector and the emergence of new communication paradigms have a profound impact on the activities of public bodies, requiring skilled management of these changes. Additionally, new tools are emerging to assist public administration in implementing these transformations. For instance, reputation management methodologies enable public bodies to enhance their awareness of social media users' sentiments and facilitate detailed analysis of shifting opinions within specific demographic groups.

Reputation is a systematic process aimed at creating a favorable organizational image through continuous self-improvement. Implementing a comprehensive set of measures to achieve an ideal reputation forms the basis for informing stakeholders about the organization's positive qualities, achievements, and potential, thereby fostering positive public opinion.

Currently, the reputation of civil servants themselves is of great importance for the further development of public service. Civil servants are a crucial link in any public apparatus, directly implementing state policy in practice. The development of managerial culture, communication skills, and leadership abilities among civil servants is an integral part of strengthening the reputation of the entire public apparatus.

To build a positive reputation for civil servants characterized by dedicated service to the nation, it is essential to establish legislation capable not only of fostering patriotism among civil servants but also of strengthening and enhancing the reputation of the public apparatus.

Based on the above, we propose fostering the positive reputation of the public apparatus by enhancing the competencies of civil servants.

Firstly, considering that civil servants are central to implementing state policy, we recommend that their professional development programs include training in effective communication skills, including social media platforms. This recommendation will enable civil servants to establish effective communication not only through personal interactions but also by responding to comments and publications on social media. To this end, we suggest fundamental principles for building effective communication for civil servants (Table 1).

Training will focus on improving the oral and written communication skills of civil servants, allowing them to convey information clearly and effectively, particularly in public and digital spaces. Programs will provide an in-depth understanding of social media platforms, with special attention to their unique characteristics, such as audience reach, engagement potential, and the viral nature of content. These insights will help officials utilize social media for strategic communications. Civil servants will be trained to respond to public comments and social media posts with professionalism, accuracy, and respect, ensuring constructive and transparent interactions (Awqaf Africa, 2024; Center for Executive Leadership in Government, 2024) (Table 1).

Special emphasis is placed on fostering public trust and the credibility of information through authentic and transparent communication, which is crucial for maintaining public confidence in state institutions (Springboard Communications, 2024; Sprinklr, 2023). Training will also address online reputation management strategies, including countering misinformation,

managing criticism, and maintaining a positive public image. Participants will familiarize themselves with ethical principles and legislative requirements related to social media use, ensuring responsible and law-abiding online behavior. Strategies for effective communication during crises or sensitive situations will also be included, focusing on disseminating accurate information and addressing public concerns. Additionally, a culture of continuous learning will be promoted, enabling civil servants to stay informed about evolving trends and technologies in social media and effectively utilize new communication tools (Virtual Social Media, 2024; Mergel, 2012) (Table 1).

**Table 1: General Aspects of Training Government Officials in Building Effective Communication**

<b>The purpose of the training</b>	<b>Description</b>
Effective communication skills	Improving the ability of government employees to communicate effectively, both in person and through written communications, including social media platforms
Understanding the dynamics of social media	Providing an understanding of the unique characteristics of social media platforms such as audience reach, engagement and viral nature, as well as how to use them for effective communications
Responses to comments and publications	Training civil servants on how to respond appropriately to comments and postings on social media, ensuring professionalism, respect and accuracy in their interactions
Building trust and credibility	Developing skills to establish trust in the public through authentic and transparent communication on social media platforms
Online Reputation Management	Equipping government employees with strategies for effectively managing their online reputation, including combating disinformation, criticism, and maintaining a positive public image
Compliance with ethical standards	Familiarizing government officials with ethical considerations and legal requirements related to the use of social networks, ensuring compliance with requirements and responsible behavior on the Internet
Crisis communication	Training civil servants on how to communicate during crises or sensitive situations, providing advice on information management and solving public problems on social media
Continuous learning and adaptation	Promoting a culture of continuous learning and adaptation to changing trends and technologies in social networks, which allows government employees to keep abreast of developments and effectively use new communication tools.

Compiled by the authors based on researches by Awqaf Africa, 2024; Center for Executive Leadership in Government, 2024; Springboard Communications, 2024; Sprinklr, 2023; Virtual Social Media, 2024; Mergel, 2012

Such a provision will establish the operational framework for public relations departments within government agencies to ensure effective communication and stakeholder engagement. The provision will define the tasks of the public relations departments and emphasize the importance of conducting surveys and monitoring social media opinions to assess public perception and gather feedback from stakeholders (Public Relations Society of America, 2024) (Table 2).

The standard provision should specify the departments to which the regulation applies, as well as the platforms (e.g., social media, online forums, news portals) on which activities such as monitoring and surveys will be conducted. The provision should also include recommendations

for conducting surveys, including frequency, data collection methods, and analytical tools, to ensure systematic public opinion monitoring. A crucial element of the provision should be strategies to facilitate effective engagement with stakeholders by creating communication channels and feedback mechanisms that consider stakeholder interests (Quorum, 2024) (Table 2).

**Table 2: Key Elements of Standard Regulation for Public Relations Departments**

<b>Regulatory element</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Goal</b>	Defining the purpose and objectives of the public relations department, including conducting surveys and monitoring opinions on social networks and other information platforms to track the opinions of stakeholders and perceptions of the public authority
<b>Scale</b>	Defining the scope of the regulations, specifying the departments or divisions of the state body to which the activities of the public relations department apply, and platforms or channels where surveys and monitoring will be conducted (for example, social networks, online forums, news portals)
<b>Polls and public opinion monitoring procedures</b>	Detailed procedures for conducting surveys and monitoring opinions on social networks and other information platforms. This includes specifying the frequency of surveys, data collection methods, analysis methods, and tools or software used to monitor and analyze public opinion
<b>Stakeholder engagement</b>	Outlining strategies and approaches for effective stakeholder engagement, such as identifying key stakeholder groups, establishing communication channels, and using feedback mechanisms to ensure that the public authority continues to respond to stakeholder concerns and representations
<b>Crisis situations and risk management</b>	The inclusion of provisions for continuous monitoring, especially during crisis situations, to promptly identify emerging problems or negative perceptions. This includes outlining the steps and protocols to be followed in the event of a crisis, as well as mechanisms to address and mitigate negative opinions or misinformation
<b>Identification and resolution of problems</b>	Creating mechanisms and procedures to identify problem areas and eliminate negative perceptions. This includes developing protocols for analyzing survey data and monitoring activities, identifying the root causes of negative perceptions, and developing strategies to effectively eliminate or mitigate these problems
<b>Reporting and analysis</b>	Defining reporting requirements and formats for the presentation of survey results, public opinion monitoring results, and analytical reports. This ensures the effective use of the collected data to inform decision-making processes in the public authority and supports the continuous improvement of communication strategies
<b>Compliance and accountability</b>	Emphasizing the importance of ethical standards, data protection rules and accountability in conducting surveys and monitoring activities. This includes the development of protocols for data processing and protection, as well as guidelines for responsible and ethical interaction with stakeholders

Compiled by the authors based on researches by Public Relations Society of America, 2024; Quorum, 2024; Penn State Harrisburg, 2023; Institute for Public Relations, 2012.

In the "risks" section of the provision, it would be prudent to include a requirement for continuous monitoring during crises to promptly identify and address negative perceptions, misinformation, or other emerging issues. The provision is recommended to establish mechanisms for data analysis to identify problem areas, eliminate the root causes of negative perceptions, and develop strategies for mitigating these issues (Penn State Harrisburg, 2023) (Table 2).

It would be appropriate for the provision to regulate reporting standards for presenting survey and monitoring results, ensuring that the data is used in decision-making processes and enhances communication strategies. Alongside this, effective measures would include protocols for adhering to ethical standards, ensuring data protection, and accountability in all public relations activities of government agencies (Institute For Public Relations, 2012) (Table 2).

Thirdly, as part of fostering a positive culture among civil servants in government agencies, we proposed to develop commentaries on the existing Code of Ethics for Civil Servants of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Decree, 2015). The Code of Ethics for Civil Servants of the Republic of Kazakhstan outlines the ethical standards and principles that civil servants are expected to adhere to (Decree, 2015). While the official Code provides foundational ethical guidelines, there is currently no publicly available commentary or explanatory notes offering detailed interpretations or practical examples for each provision.

To enhance understanding and application of the Code, it would be beneficial to develop comprehensive commentaries that provide detailed explanations for each section and provision, ensuring clarity regarding their purpose and application. In accordance with OECD recommendations, it is suggested that practical examples and scenarios be incorporated into the Code of Ethics, illustrate how ethical principles can be applied in real-life situations (OECD, 2022) (Table 3).

It is also considered useful to ensure that the Code aligns with relevant laws and regulations by providing references or clarifications on legal provisions related to specific ethical obligations and responsibilities of civil servants. Moreover, it is advisable to raise awareness and disseminate information about the contents of the Code through training programs, workshops, and online resources to ensure broad accessibility of the ethical standards for civil servants (OECD, 2022) (Table 3).

Participation in professional development programs, such as courses or seminars, aimed at strengthening ethical conduct could become an integral part of a civil servant's career development. The commentaries should remain up-to-date and reflect any changes in laws, regulations, or emerging ethical issues in the field of public service (OECD, 2022) (Table 3).

Implementing such commentaries would provide civil servants with a clearer understanding of ethical expectations and practical guidance on upholding these standards in their professional conduct (OECD, 2022) (Table 3).

**Table 3: Proposal for the Development of Commentaries to the Current Code of Ethics of Civil Servants of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Decree, 2015)**

The offer element	Description
Goal	The purpose of the proposal is to develop commentaries or explanatory notes to the current Code of Ethics of Civil Servants of the Republic of Kazakhstan to improve the understanding and interpretation of the rules and regulations set out
Scale	The commentaries will cover each section and provision of the existing Code of Ethics, providing additional explanations and practical examples that will help government officials better understand and apply ethical principles
Comprehensive coverage	Commentaries will address various aspects of ethical conduct, including integrity, accountability, impartiality, professionalism, transparency and conflict of interest, among others, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the Code of Ethics
Practical examples and scenarios	The commentaries will include practical examples and scenarios illustrating the application of ethical principles in real-life situations, which will help to better understand how the Code of Ethics should be applied in various contexts and circumstances
Alignment with laws and regulations	The commentaries will ensure compliance with the relevant laws and regulations of the Republic of Kazakhstan by providing links or clarifications of legal provisions that relate to specific ethical obligations and responsibilities of civil servants
Awareness and dissemination	The main focus will be on raising awareness among civil servants about the existence and content of commentaries to the Code of Ethics. Appropriate dissemination methods such as training sessions, workshops and online resources will be used to ensure wide accessibility
Integration with professional development	Commentaries will be included in professional development programs for government employees, such as training courses or seminars, to promote a positive culture and strengthen ethical behavior as an integral part of their professional growth and responsibilities
Review and refinement process	A review and refinement process will be established to periodically update commentaries, ensuring that they remain relevant and reflect any changes in laws, regulations or emerging ethical issues in the field of public service

Compiled by the authors based on research by OECD, 2022

Ultimately, the proposed measures will contribute to the formation of a positive culture within government institutions and enhance communication skills among civil servants. This, in turn, will strengthen the reputation of Kazakhstan's public administration agencies.

## Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of public administration, organizational reputation has emerged as a critical asset for fostering trust, legitimacy, and public engagement. This study highlights the strategic importance of reputation management in the public sector, particularly within the unique political and administrative context of Kazakhstan. Effective reputation-building is not only essential for addressing public dissatisfaction with bureaucratic inefficiencies but also serves as a catalyst for driving innovation, transparency, and accountability in governance.

The findings emphasize the necessity of adopting innovative approaches to reputation management, including enhancing the communication skills of civil servants, leveraging digital platforms for public engagement, and aligning ethical governance practices with modern societal expectations. By focusing on these measures, public administration bodies can foster a positive public image, strengthen institutional credibility, and create a more responsive and citizen-centered government.

Moreover, the study underscores the potential of reputation management to serve as a transformative tool for modernizing public administration. Integrating global best practices, adapting corporate reputation strategies, and investing in capacity-building for civil servants are critical steps toward achieving these goals.

An effective reputation management strategy represents a profitable investment for organizations. Numerous precedents demonstrate that a positive reputation can play a constructive role during organizational failures or crises. Despite various interpretations by different researchers, there is a general understanding that reputation develops over time and possesses a unique, irreplaceable character. Essentially, reputation reflects public opinion about the qualities, strengths, and weaknesses of an organization in its field of activity, including elements such as brand, image, and publicity, with its material expression being goodwill.

A favorable reputation can impact various outcomes, including an organization's legitimacy, independence, and interorganizational collaboration. There is a need for further research on individual-level reputation and how stakeholders perceive and interpret an organization's reputation. Moreover, further international and comparative reputation studies are required, extending beyond the Western context to include developing countries. Currently, such research is lacking in the literature, offering significant research opportunities for scholars in public administration.

This article makes a significant contribution to strengthening the reputation of public institutions by providing specific and practically oriented recommendations.

Together, the measures proposed in this article represent important steps toward improving the reputation of public institutions by enhancing professionalism, ethics, and communication effectiveness. These findings can serve as the basis for further research and practical applications in the field of public administration.

In conclusion, reputation management represents a vital innovation for public administration, offering governments an opportunity to enhance public trust, improve service delivery, and build a foundation for long-term institutional resilience. Future research should further explore the relationship between reputation and innovation in public administration, with a focus on comparative studies across diverse governance systems.

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