

## BETWEEN CONTROL AND DIALOGUE: SYSTEMIC COMMUNICATION DYSFUNCTION AMONG PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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**Annotation.** The research investigates how institutional hierarchies and administrative constraints shape the communication practices of Public Information Officers (PIOs) in Almaty local government and public institutions. The Excellence Theory guided this phenomenological study, which described the experiences of 20 PIOs using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that PIOs in Almaty Oblast struggle with bureaucratic approval chains, role ambiguity, and risk aversion suppress communicative initiative, while adversarial media relations and low public trust reinforce external asymmetry. Together, these forces created a context of systemic communication dysfunction, in which transparency and dialogue are structurally constrained despite official reforms under the Listening State initiative. Scientifically the study extends the Excellence Theory to a post-Soviet governance context, in which institutional asymmetry prevents communicative reforms to achieve symmetry. The practical contribution of the study draws attention to the need of structural, not rhetorical, transformation toward dialogue, autonomy, and professionalization for PIOs to be the most effective.

**Keywords:** public information officers, local government, bureaucracy, public trust, media relations, Kazakhstan, communication challenges

**Аңдатпа.** Бұл зерттеу Алматы қаласының жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару органдары мен мемлекеттік мекемелеріндегі қоғаммен байланыс қызметкерлерінің (Public Information Officers, PIOs) коммуникациялық тәжірибесіне институционалдық иерархия мен әкімшілік шектеулердің қалай әсер ететінін талдайды. Зерттеу Excellence Theory (жетілдіру теориясы) негізінде жүргізілген феноменологиялық тәсілді қолданады және 20 қоғаммен байланыс қызметкерінің терең, жартылай құрылымданған сұхбаттардағы тәжірибесін сипаттайды. Нәтижелер көрсеткендей, Алматылық қоғаммен байланыс қызметкерлері бюрократиялық келісім тізбектерімен, рөлдердің анық еместігімен және тәуекелден қашумен күреседі, бұл олардың коммуникациялық бастамасын шектейді. Сонымен қатар, бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарымен шиеленіскен қатынастар мен қоғамның сенімінің төмен деңгейі сыртқы асимметрияны күшейтеді. Осы факторлардың барлығы жүйелі коммуникациялық дисфункция жағдайын қалыптастырады, мұнда «Тыңдайтын мемлекет» бастамасы аясындағы ресми реформаларға қарамастан, ашықтық пен диалог құрылымдық тұрғыдан шектелген. Ғылыми тұрғыдан алғанда, бұл зерттеу посткеңестік басқару контекстінде жетілдіру теориясының қолданылу аясын кеңейтеді, мұнда институционалдық асимметрия симметрияға бағытталған коммуникациялық реформалардың жүзеге асуына кедергі келтіреді. Зерттеудің практикалық маңызы – қоғаммен байланыс қызметкерлерінің тиімділігін арттыру үшін диалогқа, дербестікке және кәсібилендіруге бағытталған құрылымдық (риторикалық емес) өзгерістердің қажеттілігіне назар аударуында.

**Түйінді сөздер:** қоғаммен байланыс қызметкерлері, жергілікті мемлекеттік басқару, бюрократия, қоғамдық сенім, БАҚ-пен байланыс, Қазақстан, коммуникациялық қиындықтар.

**Аннотация.** В исследовании рассматривается, как институциональные иерархии и административные ограничения формируют коммуникационные практики сотрудников по связям с общественностью (Public Information Officers, PIOs) в органах местного самоуправления и государственных учреждениях Алматы. Феноменологическое исследование основано на Теории совершенства (Excellence Theory) и описывает опыт 20 специалистов по связям с общественностью с использованием глубинных полуструктурированных интервью. Результаты показали, что сотрудники по связям с общественностью в Алматинской области сталкиваются с бюрократическими цепочками согласований, неопределённостью ролей и избеганием рисков, что подавляет их инициативу в коммуникации. Дополнительными факторами выступают конфликтные отношения со средствами массовой информации и низкий уровень общественного доверия, усиливающие внешнюю асимметрию. Совокупно

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эти факторы создают контекст системной дисфункции коммуникаций, в котором прозрачность и диалог структурно ограничены, несмотря на официальные реформы в рамках инициативы «Слышащее государство». С научной точки зрения исследование расширяет применение Теории совершенства в постсоветском контексте государственного управления, где институциональная асимметрия препятствует реализации симметричных коммуникационных реформ. Практическая значимость исследования заключается в акцентировании внимания на необходимости структурных, а не риторических преобразований - в сторону диалога, автономии и профессионализации сотрудников по связям с общественностью для повышения их эффективности.

**Ключевые слова:** сотрудники по связям с общественностью, местное самоуправление, бюрократия, общественное доверие, отношения со СМИ, Казахстан, коммуникационные вызовы.

## Introduction

Post-Soviet governments experience communication crises that undermine accountability and public trust. The *WPP Government and Public Sector Practice Report* [1] identified chronic problems in public sector communication: one-directional information flows, limited listening capacity, and poor interdepartmental coordination. These dynamics weaken governments' capacity to communicate policies effectively to increasingly networked and skeptical publics.

The 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer [2] identifies public governments and the media worldwide as the two primary social actors experiencing intense distrust. Public legitimacy can be restored through proactive listening, public dialogue, and social engagement, rather than just publicity alone. Thus, the Excellence Theory conceptualizes effective government communication as a transparent, mutually beneficial relationship based on ongoing negotiation of meaning, understanding, and accountability.

In 2022 President Tokayev introduced the *Listening State* initiative promoting openness and partnership, yet local institutions still operate through top-down bureaucratic routines in his State of the Nation Address [3]. Despite public calls for open communication, three years later, Kazakhstan's local government and public institutions continue to communicate in a top-down manner, with citizens remaining entrenched in a past bureaucratic communication culture. Kazakhstan's e-government provides over 90% of services online, yet functions as an automated bureaucracy rather than a platform for engagement and trust-building. This, in turn, obstructs the government's listening capacity.

These structural features have direct implications for the professional role of local government PIOs of Kazakhstan as intermediaries between local governmental and public institutions, media, and citizens. PIOs, as the institutional synapse, are expected to communicate institutional priorities outward and to convey public sentiment in and upward public administration pipelines. However, in practice, Almaty's PIOs face both internal and external constraints. Internally, multiple approval layers and politicized media dynamics confine PIOs to reactive rather than strategic communication roles. Externally, local government PIOs operate in a context of low media trust and politicized news environments, which further narrows their efforts for open dialogue and mutually beneficial relations. As a result, PIOs' communicative role remains reactive and symbolic rather than strategic or participatory; and it is the system that privileges control over interaction and compliance over responsiveness that corners Almaty Oblast PIOs.

Kazakhstan's *Listening State* has yet to promote genuine transparency, leaving PIO communication largely performative and top-down. This creates a systemic communication dysfunction, in which structural, cultural, and political forces collectively prevent dialogic engagement, distort feedback flows, and weaken public trust. This dysfunction does not stem from individual incompetence but from institutional logics that are misaligned with the communicative goals of Kazakhstan's governance reform.

To address this gap, the examination focused on how these systemic conditions are produced and reproduced in everyday PIOs' communication practices. Therefore, this study poses the following research question:

*How do the institutional and bureaucratic logics embedded in Kazakhstan's local government produce systemic communication dysfunction that constrains Public Information Officers' dialogic and trust-oriented communication?*

This study contributes to public communication scholarship by illuminating how organizational and bureaucratic structures shape (and limit) dialogic communication in Kazakhstan's post-Soviet context, focusing on the communicative dimensions of administrative hierarchy and control.

## Literature Review

### *Global context of government communication*

Globally, disinformation and political polarization have weakened governments' capacity to engage credibly with digitally networked publics. Sanders and Canel [4] characterize government communication as a complex, multi-layered activity that involves both administrative accountability and public responsiveness. However, public institution communication is regarded as a low-priority tactical afterthought to policy implementation instead of being a strategic management device [5]. Internally, PIOs can operate within rigid hierarchies that prefer control over cooperation, and political leaders often manage them as a matter of habit [6]. Externally, digital splintering, information excess, and algorithmic echo chambers complicate the act of connecting and communicating with heterogeneous publics. Such dynamics reflect a condition where institutional structure, political rationality, and communication process are in disarray and transform in a systemic communication dysfunction [7]. Effective government communication relies on symmetrical, two-way interaction that fosters dialogue, relationships, and interdependence [8]. The gap between normative ideals and institutional realities has become a defining concern for public sector communication [9].

### *Public information officers as boundary-spanners*

Public Information Officers (PIOs) are communication boundary-spanners [10] who mediate between the public institution and its external stakeholders and journalists by managing the social relationships. Nevertheless, the PIO-journalist relationship is usually tense: journalists are dependent on PIOs for access to information from state and other organizations, yet PIOs operate in political environments that necessitate discipline in message and control [11]. Thus, PIOs must perform two contradictory roles oscillating between openness and control. They need to facilitate transparency while taking on risk for their organizations. Additionally, where bureaucratic rationality dominates, information flows are filtered, reactive, and vertical. The Astana Civil Service Hub [12] finds that the majority of Central Asian state institutions, including Kazakhstan, continue to use digital and social media minimally as bulletin boards rather than as platforms for dialogue. This limits two-way interaction and maintains one-way communication systems that only work towards reproducing systemic dysfunctions. Kazakhstan governmental communicators still heavily rely on mainstream media to construct narratives and market reforms [13]. In such an environment, PIOs and journalists are driven by distrust, leading to dysfunction and converting possible cooperative relationships into narrow transactions of symbolic messages rather than dialogue [14]. At the same time, examples from other contexts, show that when PIOs are institutionally empowered, they can act as trusted intermediaries who promote transparency and coherence across government communication [15]. These comparative views highlight the importance of institutional design and communicative culture to whether PIOs continue or move beyond systemic communication failure.

### *Public communication in Kazakhstan*

Kazakhstan's public communication reflects global structural issues but is further constrained by post-Soviet bureaucratic legacies. Professional public communication is the most evident in Almaty and Astana. Regional disparities-weak media, poor digital infrastructure, and personal network reliance-continue to hinder professional practice [16]. Akhmetova [17] points out that communication policy needs to be more than information management; it should also serve as a means of dialogue and social integration. These findings suggest that the government's *Listening State* initiative - intended to foster transparency - often collides with entrenched bureaucratic norms that prioritize control and message discipline over responsiveness.

Empirical studies confirm chronic deficiencies in planning, targeting, and stakeholder engagement within Kazakhstan's government communication departments. Additionally, there is a lack of professional public communicators [18] and institutional support for PIOs communication [19]. Meanwhile, Utemissov and Koshkenov [20] observe an ongoing tension between state control and media independence, pointing to political roots of systemic failure. Cumulatively, these studies describe a public communications system in which technical modernization — e-government included — is not being followed by communicative openness or by citizens' trust.

### *Systemic communication dysfunction in Kazakhstan's public sector*

Systemic communication breakdown happens when bureaucratic hierarchies, politicized control, and cultural inertia cumulatively constrict dialogic interaction and distort meaning. In Kazakhstan, this breakdown is both structural and cultural — built into hierarchical administrative routines and underpinned by low trust between institutions, media, and citizens. Public Information

Officers labor in the middle of this apparatus and are tasked with brokering communication between society and the state in the face of constricting institutional and political logics.

Theoretically, the integration of organizational communication, boundary-spanning, and dialogic communication theories supplies the foundations for understanding this phenomenon. Organizational communication theory explains the mechanisms PIOs use to direct the message flow and meaning construction within a bureaucratic organization [21]. The Boundary-spanning theory posits PIOs as mediators in handling tensions between competing calls for transparency and control. The Theory of dialogic communication helps assess whether and how communication practices can build trust and engagement [22]. Together, these theories explain the communicative processes through which institutional and political logics produce systemic pathology in Kazakhstan's local government.

While earlier research documents communication reforms, professionalization challenges, and the persistence of top-down cultures in public administration in Kazakhstan, few explore how these power relations are enacted communicatively in the day-to-day work of PIOs. Research is more often structural or policy-oriented, with less emphasis on communicators' experiences navigating hierarchical systems. As a result, the communicative aspects of systemic malfunctioning — how political and institutional logics are performed through daily habits, message clearance, and interactions with citizens and journalists — are undertheorized.

This study fills this gap by applying an applied communication framework to examine how systemic communication breakdown is discursively constructed and reconstructed within Kazakhstan's local governments. It contributes to a more comprehensive account of how governance patterns shape public communication.

## Methodology

### *Research design*

This descriptive phenomenological study employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to investigate the internal and external challenges faced by PIOs in Almaty akimats (municipalities) and public institutions of Almaty Oblast. Thus, the lived experiences of the PIOs' professional challenges were examined and interpreted. Inductive reasoning was used to allow themes and patterns to emerge from participants' narratives. The semi-structured interviews encouraged thick descriptions of PIOs' daily work.

### *Sampling, selection criteria, and participant profile*

PIOs from Almaty Oblast akimats and public organizations were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy. The selection criteria required participants to:

1. hold the position of a press office director or senior public communication officer;
2. possess a minimum of two years' experience as a PIO;
3. currently employed within the local government structures of Almaty Oblast.

The research aimed to interview at least 12 PIOs to achieve sufficient depth and diversity of perspective. A total of 17 interviews were conducted. As shown in Table 1, the 17 interviewees were Public Information Officers (PIOs) of varying degrees of professional experience and educational backgrounds. The number of women interviewees was 11, and the men was six. Most of them held senior positions as press secretaries. The average work experience across participants was 7.5 years, with individual experience ranging from 2 to 20 years. The study, therefore, captured a range of PIOs across local government administration units and public sector institutions in Almaty Oblast.

**Table 1 Profile of Interviewees**

Interviewee	Gender	Position	Years of experience as PIO	Major	Unit
Interviewee 1	F	Press secretary	3	Journalism	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 2	F	Press officer	4	International Law	Executive governmental unit
Interviewee 3	M	Press officer	4	Chemistry technology	Akimat's unit

Interviewee 4	M	Press officer	2	Electrical Engineering	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 5	F	Press officer	6	Journalism	Quazi (public-private) unit
Interviewee 6	M	Junior Press Officer	3	Jurisprudence	Executive governmental unit
Interviewee 7	F	Press secretary	7	International Economic Relations	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 8	M	Press officer	11	Economics	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 9	F	Press secretary	11	Journalism	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 10	F	Press secretary	4	Pedagogy	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 11	M	Press secretary	10	International Law	Executive governmental unit
Interviewee 12	F	Press secretary	20	Jurisprudence	Executive governmental unit
Interviewee 13	F	Press secretary	10	Public Administration	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 14	F	Press secretary	8	Fire safety	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 15	F	Press secretary	14	Journalism	Quazi (public-private) unit
Interviewee 16	F	Press secretary	3	Public Health	Akimat's unit
Interviewee 17	M	Press officer	8	History	Akimat's unit

(Source: compiled by the authors)

### *Instruments and procedures*

The interview protocol consisted of two sets of questions: (1) demographic information (gender, education, work experience, and salary), and (2) professional experiences related to internal and external communication. The second section was informed by five thematic areas previously identified in global studies on public sector communication in WPP Government & Public Sector Practice:

- Rising distrust;
- Limited stakeholder engagement;
- One-directional communication structures;
- Lagging adaptation to digital media;
- Limited organizational influence of communication professionals.

Every interview started with *Can you describe a typical day in your press office?* The follow-up questions explored participants' instances of communication challenges, managerial responses to complex media inquiries, and the availability of experts for public interviews. To validate the interview guide, pilot interviews were conducted with three professionals: one akimat PIO from a different region, a governmental relations specialist from a private communications agency, and a press officer from a state-owned enterprise—all with a minimum of three years of professional experience. The interviews were conducted in either Russian or Kazakh, depending on each participant's preference. This ensured linguistic consistency and participant comfort.

### *Data analysis*

Data were analyzed following Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method:

1. Repeated reading of interview transcripts;
2. Extraction of significant statements related to the research phenomenon;
3. Formulation of meanings from significant statements;



4. Aggregation of formulated meanings into clusters of themes;
5. Development of an exhaustive description of the phenomenon;
6. Formulation of the fundamental structure of the experience;
7. Validation of findings through participant feedback [23].

To ensure reliability, the coding was conducted independently by the principal researcher and a graduate student in public relations. A random sample comprising 50% (n = 62) of the total codes (n = 124) was double-coded, yielding agreement on 51 codes and divergence on 11. Cohen's  $\kappa$  was calculated at 0.65, indicating substantial intercoder reliability [24]. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus, enhancing the consistency of the thematic analysis.

$$\kappa = \frac{Po - Pe}{1 - Pe}$$

#### Data saturation

Thematic saturation, as presented in Table 2, was determined on a base size of four interviews, a run length of two, and  $\leq 5\%$  new information as the cut-off point, which was achieved in the 14th interview. This ensured data adequacy and methodological rigor.

**Table 2. Data saturation**

	Base size				Run length														
# of interviews	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Total	
New themes per interview	9	12	7	16	4	5	5	3	2	3	2	2	1	1	1	0	0	73	
# of base themes	39				23%		21%		13%		10.3		5.1%		2.6%				

(Source: compiled by the authors)

#### Findings

The study looked at how systemic communication dysfunction is caused by the institutional and bureaucratic logics in Kazakhstan's local government. It limits the work of PIOs in public organizations or the government structure of Almaty Oblast. The findings showed that ingrained organizational and cultural barriers, rather than personal incapacity, are the cause of communication breakdowns. Therefore, effective public communication relies on symmetrical, two-way interaction that fosters mutual understanding and trust. The evidence presented here demonstrates the extent to which institutional hierarchies deviate from this ideal in practice.

Three interrelated dimensions of dysfunction emerged:

- (1) the absence of professional communication education and training;
- (2) internal organizational constraints; and
- (3) external challenges shaped by low trust and adversarial media environments.

Table 3 contrasts the major internal and external challenges revealed by the study, illustrating how the two reinforce one another within Kazakhstan's hierarchical communication system.

**Table 3. Internal vs. External challenges faced by PIOs in Almaty Oblast**

Internal challenges	External challenges
1. Unclear mandates and role definitions	1. Low public trust in government institutions
2. Slow intra-departmental information exchange	2. Public skepticism and tense interactions
3. Rigid hierarchical structures delay decisions	3. Adversarial relationships with journalists
4. Risk aversion and fear of responsibility	4. Media prioritizing sensationalism over substance
5. Inadequate working conditions and outdated equipment	5. Selective or distorted reporting by journalists
6. Lack of formal communication education/training	6. Hostile encounters with bloggers and influencers

(Source: compiled by the authors)

A significant portion of respondents lacked formal education in journalism, media, or communication. Only four interviewees held degrees in journalism; most had academic backgrounds

in unrelated administrative or technical fields, such as pedagogy and history. This absence of professional preparation limits PIOs' ability to operate in complex media environments and contributes to the systemic undervaluing of communication as a strategic function in government — a pattern also noted globally.

The professional deficit reinforces institutional hierarchies in which communication is viewed as secondary to administration, thus constraining the development of dialogic and trust-oriented communication practices envisioned under Kazakhstan's *Listening State* initiative.

#### ***Internal dimension of systemic communication dysfunction***

The interviews revealed multiple internal organizational challenges that impede Almaty Oblast PIOs' performance and illustrate the institutional logic of control dominating local government communication.

##### ***Unclear mandates and role definitions.***

PIOs reported persistent ambiguity about their authority and responsibilities, leading to limited cooperation across departments. "Some departments and employees may not fully understand the role and tasks of the press office. We often need to educate them on the importance of communication and the press office's function in crisis and routine operations" (Interviewee 6). This ambiguity reflects the institutional marginalization of communication functions, where PIOs lack decision-making legitimacy and are treated as support staff rather than strategic actors.

##### ***Slow intra-departmental information exchange.***

Information crucial for timely media responses was frequently delayed or fragmented, forcing PIOs to rebuild information from scratch. "Departments sometimes provide only partial information or withhold data due to internal priorities and resource allocation. We often must rebuild information from scratch, which delays timely communication" (Interviewee 3). Such delays exemplify bureaucratic filtering typical of hierarchical systems, where information moves vertically rather than horizontally, undermining coordination and responsiveness.

##### ***Limiting hierarchical structures.***

Multiple approval layers constrained message timeliness and accuracy. "Coordination takes too long, especially when responses must be double-checked with other agencies. These delays compromise the immediacy that media require" (Interviewee 7). These findings echo the organizational communication dysfunctions where excessive control suppresses feedback and distorts meaning.

##### ***Fear of responsibility and risk aversion.***

Very often, decision-making was delayed because of fear of taking responsibility and career repercussions. "Public managers fear taking responsibility and escalating decisions upward. This creates delays, resulting in lost relevance and credibility in the media narrative" (Interviewee 14). This culture of risk avoidance reflects the logic of self-protection, which inhibits open dialogue and reduces communicative agility — a key element of systemic dysfunction.

##### ***Inadequate working conditions.***

PIOs described outdated equipment, limited staff, and minimal institutional support, which further isolates and prevents them from effectively connecting public administration and Almaty citizens. Together, these factors show how vertical control and rigidity restrict PIOs' initiative and dialogue.

#### **External dimension: political and media constraints**

PIOs also faced external challenges that mirror and reinforce internal dysfunction, primarily rooted in public distrust, politicized media relations, and fragmented digital environments.

##### ***Low public trust and hostility toward government representatives.***

Respondents described daily confrontations with skeptical citizens who perceive official messages as insincere or manipulative. "When attempting dialogue, we often encounter aggression, refusals to communicate, and accusations. Many citizens film interactions for social media without consent, escalating tensions unnecessarily" (Interviewee 7).

Thus, institutional legitimacy deficits manifest communicatively: citizens reject dialogic overtures because previous one-way communication has eroded credibility. Misinformation spread via social media further deepened this divide, producing unrealistic expectations and resentment. "After the January events, public expectations for justice and prosperity have grown dramatically, yet people underestimate how difficult systemic change truly is" (Interviewee 17).

##### ***Adversarial relationships with journalists.***

PIOs reported frequent tension with journalists who prioritize controversy over substance. “Our anti-corruption efforts often receive no coverage. Journalists prefer dramatic stories about criminal investigations instead” (Interviewee 2). Several participants described biased or selectively edited reporting that distorted facts. “In one case, crucial facts explaining technical difficulties during a fire were entirely omitted, creating a misleading narrative” (Interviewee 14). These dynamics exemplify how mutual mistrust between state communicators and the media reproduces systemic dysfunction, replacing dialogue with confrontation.

#### *Hostile encounters with bloggers and influencers.*

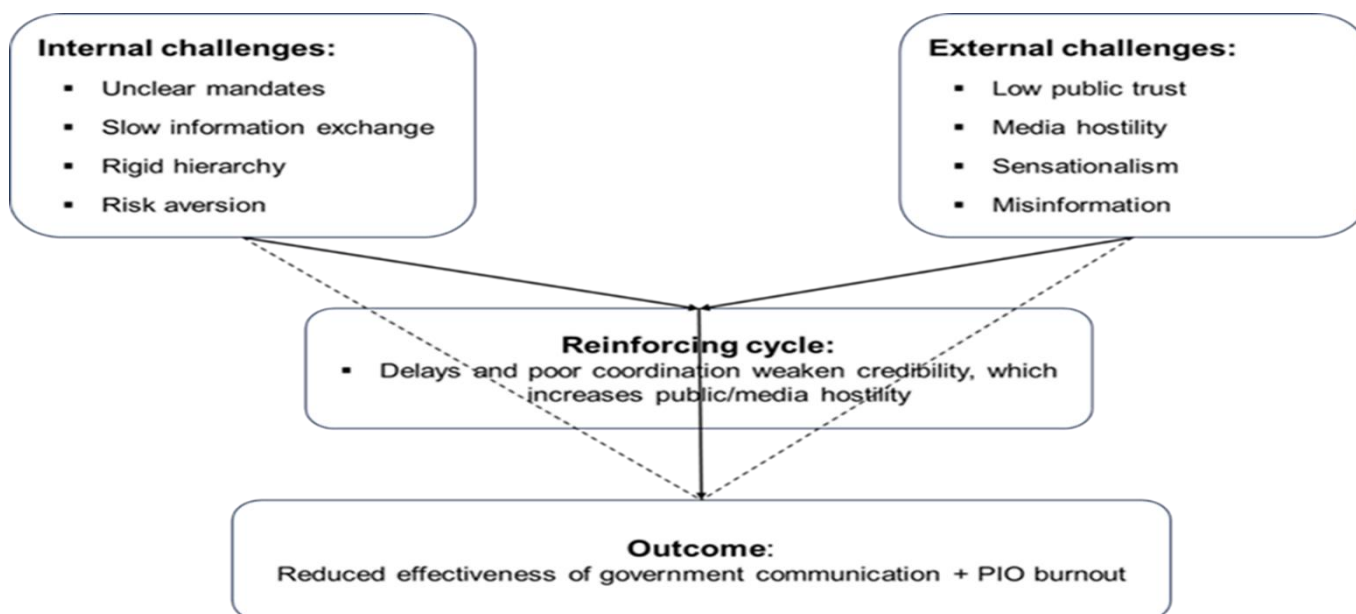
The growing influence of online opinion leaders in Kazakhstan added new pressures. “One blogger made deeply personal and offensive remarks during coverage of vaccination issues. Such incidents create immense emotional distress and burnout” (Interviewee 16). This shift toward unregulated, personality-driven media further destabilizes professional communication channels and amplifies emotional and reputational risk for PIOs.

Together, these external challenges confirm that systemic communication dysfunction is reinforced by a hostile external ecosystem where low institutional trust and politicized media dynamics constrain PIOs’ ability to practice dialogic, trust-building communication. The PIOs’ accounts showed how bureaucratic logic and media sensationalism interact to perpetuate symbolic rather than substantive engagement for the public interest.

#### *Reinforcing the cycle of dysfunction*

The conceptual model in Figure 1 illustrates how bureaucratic processes and external pressures form a dysfunctional self-perpetuating cycle. Internally, rigid hierarchies suppress initiative and delay information exchange; externally, public skepticism and antagonistic media responses further delegitimize government communication efforts.

**Figure 1. Reinforcing the cycle of internal and external challenges**



(Source: compiled by the authors)

Therefore, the Almaty PIOs experience closed feedback loops, information filtering, delay of decisions, or mistrust of their capabilities to overcome obstacles. Such processes demonstrate how the organizational chain of command and rationality combine to facilitate what the theory of boundary-extending and dialogical communication conceptualizes as systemic communication dysfunction. The following discussion provides a theoretical explanation of these patterns by existing academic studies and explains how bureaucratic organizations make communication openness and trust-building impossible.

## **Discussion**

These patterns reveal how bureaucratic hierarchy and political control institutionalize systemic communication dysfunction that limits dialogue and trust. This section interprets these dynamics through the lens of Excellence Theory and complementary perspectives from organizational and dialogic communication. By situating the experiences of Kazakhstan’s Public



Information Officers (PIOs) within these frameworks, the discussion demonstrates how structural asymmetries undermine the ideals of symmetrical communication that form the foundation of effective governance.

*Organizational hierarchies and the logic of control*

As identified earlier, unclear mandates, delayed flows, and risk aversion sustain a logic of control over collaboration. This, Weick [25] defines as a strictly regulated procedure in which each message must go through official approval before being permitted to be released to the public. Others call it organized ambiguity, a defensive communication culture that manages uncertainty through silence, delay, or over-regulation [26].

It is also counter to the Excellence Theory's symmetrical communication, which positions public communication as a strategic management function promoting two-way interaction and mutual understanding. Moreover, communication remains operational rather than strategic, subordinate to administrative decision-making. Such marginalization is common in bureaucratic states where communicators are treated as information technicians rather than policy advisers. The evidence here suggests that institutional design—not individual incompetence—produces this imbalance. As a result, citizens' experiences are not reflected in government communications.

*Boundary-spanning dilemma*

PIOs occupy a boundary-spanning role mediating between state and society [27]. However, in reality, they lack organizational legitimacy as well as professional autonomy. According to Johansson and Johansson [28], communicators can only successfully carry out boundary roles when they are acknowledged as strategic players in decision-making processes. PIOs explain the exact opposite in this study: they have to defend transparency, explain their own relevance, and negotiate a hierarchy that gives political caution over dialogue.

Externally, PIOs face sensationalist journalism and polarized media echoing Carlson and Cuillier's [29] observations of politicized journalism elsewhere. In Kazakhstan, though, this tension is exacerbated by weak media independence and public skepticism of official sources. The PIO's boundary-spanning function thus yields to the pressure of institutional and societal asymmetry. These dynamics confirm that without empowerment, communicators remain structurally incapable of performing a strategic role in governance.

*Excellence theory and the breakdown of symmetrical communication*

As posited by Excellence Theory, symmetrical communication underpins trust and legitimacy. The Kazakhstani case, however, shows the persistence of asymmetrical communication, directed at managing public opinion rather than enabling dialogue. The *Listening State* reform rhetorically aligns with Excellence Theory yet remains undermined by multi-level approvals and centralized control [30].

Table 4 illustrates the systemic gap between Kazakhstan's current public communication practices and the benchmarks of the Excellence Theory.

**Figure 2. Current practice (based on the research findings) vs. Excellence theory**

Dimension	Current practice in Kazakhstan	Excellence theory benchmark
Communication function role	PIOs positioned as technical staff, subordinated to administrative hierarchies; excluded from policy-level discussions.	Integrated into strategic management; communicators act as policy advisers contributing to decision-making.
Communication flow	Predominantly one-way, top-down dissemination; limited feedback loops; communication used for control and coordination.	Symmetrical two-way communication emphasizing dialogue, feedback, and mutual understanding.
Organizational structure	Highly centralized structures with multiple approval layers; delayed responses due to bureaucratic filtering.	Decentralized and flexible hierarchies enabling rapid exchange and adaptation.
Professional capacity	Majority of PIOs lack formal communication education; professional development opportunities are scarce.	Staff with specialized education and continuous professional training in communication and PR.
Relationship with media	Adversarial and distrustful relations; journalists prioritize controversy; frequent selective reporting.	Cooperative and transparent relationships supporting mutual trust and information flow.

Public engagement	Low public trust and confrontational interactions; communication often perceived as symbolic rather than substantive.	Dialogic communication fostering trust, responsiveness, and shared problem-solving.
Crisis and risk communication	Responses delayed by approval chains and fear of responsibility; limited transparency due to risk aversion.	Rapid, transparent, and coordinated responses with institutional autonomy for communicators.
Cultural & political environment	Persistent political caution and legacy of information control; dialogue equated with vulnerability rather than strength.	Norms of openness and accountability supporting institutional legitimacy through communication.
Overall orientation	Asymmetrical, hierarchical, and control-based system reflecting bureaucratic and post-Soviet administrative culture.	Symmetrical, participatory, and trust-based system consistent with democratic governance.

(Source: compiled by the authors)

### *Dialogic communication and the Listening State*

Although premised on openness and reciprocity, the *Listening State* remains largely rhetorical in practice. What takes place is what Sadykova et al. refer to as symbolic dialogue—communication that mimics responsiveness without necessarily opening up for engagement.

Dialogic communication requires not just an exchange of messages but also a renegotiation of relationships between institutions and publics. It is this structural tension that accounts for the fact that listening reforms have a tendency to produce performative engagement rather than sustained conversation. The case therefore illustrates a broader paradox of transitional governance: communication reforms are rhetorically embraced as modernization, yet bureaucratic logics endure. This reinforces the insight that talk cannot be institutionalized by decree—it must be built through new communicative norms and decentralized control.

### *Systemic communication dysfunction as a multi-level process*

Integrating these strands, the study conceptualizes systemic communication dysfunction as a process operating across organizational, institutional, and societal levels. At the organizational level, bureaucratic structures and procedural hierarchies constrain feedback and delay communication, consistent with Weick and Eisenberg et al. At the institutional level, political cautiousness and control mechanisms entrench a culture of message management rather than dialogue. At the societal level, low trust in media and adversarial journalism entrench polarization and constructive exchange barriers.

These levels support one another in a recursive cycle: rigidity inside legitimates mistrust outside, and public hostility reciprocally reinforces the state's impulse to control information. This compound model provides a deeper understanding of the reproduction of communicative asymmetry. It diverts analytic focus away from capacity as a personal characteristic and toward systemic reason, showing that even skilled communicators are constrained by institutional settings in which they practice.

### *Implications for reform and professionalization*

The system calls for institutional recognition of communication as a strategic governance function—a principle long emphasized in Excellence Theory and by Johansson and Johansson. Professional public communication training, currently negligible, must be included in civil service training. Freeing communicators with flatter hierarchies and clearer mandates can render it more responsive and less prone to bureaucratic drag.

Trust must also be institutionalized as an operational goal. Legitimacy is secured only through constant dialogue and understanding, not through crisis communications. Finally, the *Listening State* must be reimagined as a long-term cultural transformation rather than a short-term political slogan. Its success depends less on digital communication than on the extent to which government actors internalize dialogic values in everyday practice.

## **Conclusion**

This study tested Excellence Theory in a post-Soviet transitional context, demonstrating how systemic and political constraints undermine symmetrical communication despite formal change. Second, it proposes systemic communication dysfunction as a multi-level explanatory framework spanning organizational hierarchies, political control, and public mistrust. Third, it provides rare qualitative evidence from Kazakhstan, illustrating how communicators negotiate the tension between

bureaucratic loyalty and dialogic aspiration. By integrating theory and empirical observation, the study reaffirms that communication change will not be delivered by rhetoric alone.

### Limitations

This study acknowledges the following limitations that affect the generalizability and extent of its findings. The study focuses on Almaty Oblast findings may not generalize nationwide. Self-censorship due to political sensitivity could also limit disclosure depth. Despite these limitations, the study offers a robust exploratory analysis of the professional realities of PIOs in Kazakhstan, with empirically grounded insights into a comparatively under-researched field of public sector communication.

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**БАҚЫЛАУ МЕН ДИАЛОГТЫҢ АРАСЫНДА: ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК АҚПАРАТ ҚЫЗМЕТКЕРЛЕРІ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ КОММУНИКАЦИЯЛЫҚ ЖҮЙЕЛІК ДИСФУНКЦИЯ**

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**МЕЖДУ КОНТРОЛЕМ И ДИАЛОГОМ: СИСТЕМНАЯ ДИСФУНКЦИЯ КОММУНИКАЦИИ СРЕДИ СПЕЦИАЛИСТОВ ПО СВЯЗЯМ С ОБЩЕСТВЕННОСТЬЮ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ**

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