

## Determinants of Youth Protest Potential in Kazakhstan, 2021-2025: Evidence from Survey Data

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### Abstract

This study investigates youth protest potential in Kazakhstan between 2021 and 2025, situating national trends within the broader global context of youth-led socio-political engagement. The analysis is based on a longitudinal survey of over 10,000 respondents, with the 2021-2022 wave covering individuals aged 14-28 and the 2023-2025 wave extending the upper age limit to 34. Demographic analysis indicates a cohort-specific expansion of the youngest youth segment (14-18 years), suggesting potential medium-term socio-economic pressures on education, employment, and social integration. Survey findings reveal that economic grievances remain the primary driver of youth protest readiness, with willingness to participate in protests due to rising prices for essential goods increasing from 20.7% in 2021 to 28.2% in 2025. In parallel, political sensitivity intensified, as corruption and perceived government inaction were increasingly perceived as threats to social equality, reflecting a shift from material concerns toward politically articulated motivations. These results indicate that youth political mobilization in Kazakhstan constitutes a structured and socially embedded form of protest participation, shaped by demographic shifts, economic pressures, institutional distrust, and evolving political awareness with younger cohorts.

**Keywords:** *youth mobilization, protest activity, political participation, economic grievances*

### Introduction

In recent years, young people, particularly members of Generation Z, have increasingly emerged as key actors not only in protest mobilization but also in broader socio-political transformations (Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026). Globally, this phenomenon has been referred to as the “Generation Z revolution” or the “Zoomer uprising,” highlighting both its generational specificity and transnational scope. The 2025 wave of protests illustrates this trend, with youth playing central roles in political changes in countries such as Morocco, Madagascar, Nepal, Peru, and Indonesia.

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In Madagascar, demonstrations triggered by persistent disruptions in electricity and water supply contributed to the collapse of the government, while in Nepal, youth-led protests against corruption and nepotism led to the resignation of the prime minister (Saaliq, 2025). These cases point to the emergence of a new model of youth political participation, in which localized grievances are transformed into institutional change.

Against this global backdrop, similar dynamics are observable in Kazakhstan (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019). Structural transformations in Kazakhstani society have been accompanied by an increase in political sensitivity among youth, manifested in growing engagement in public forms of civic action (Baizhumakzy et al., 2025). Notable episodes include the 2019 snap presidential elections and subsequent acts of symbolic protest, such as the banner displayed in Almaty with the slogan “You can’t run away from the truth”, which became a landmark expression of youth civic activism (Amnesty International, 2019).

Similarly, during the January 2022 protests, young people again formed a prominent part of the movement, signaling a heightened demand for political participation and social justice (Khamzina et al., 2025). Apart from participating in the protests themselves, some young people used digital tools to bypass blockages and access information about the situation in the country when internet resources were restricted. The “Narikbi case” exemplifies how youth not only assert freedom of expression but also adapt swiftly to repressive conditions in digital environments (Reznik, 2023). In particular, during the January 2022 protests, Kazakhstani programmer Maqсут Narikbi, who was working abroad, provided access to proxy servers to bypass restrictions and restore Telegram connectivity amid the internet shutdown. This case illustrates how young people used their professional digital skills and transnational resources to maintain information flows and civic communication under condition of digital pressure. However, existing research relies heavily on isolated case studies, limiting the ability to access the scale, effectiveness, and long-term political impact of such digital resistance practices.

At the national level, these developments raise questions about the underlying factors shaping youth involvement in protest actions. Recent demographic trends show a cohort-specific expansion in the youngest youth segment (14-18 years), which may increase socio-economic pressures on education, employment, and social mobility. Concurrently, survey data from 2021-2025 indicate that economic grievances, such as rising prices for essential goods and utility tariffs, alongside governance-related concerns, including corruption and perceived institutional ineffectiveness, are

the primary triggers of youth protest readiness. These patterns suggest that youth activism in Kazakhstan is structured and socially embedded rather than episodic, reflecting the interaction of material grievances, perceived political opportunities, and mobilization capacities.

### **Research questions**

Building on these observations, this study addresses two interrelated research questions:

RQ1: What demographic changes are observed among youth in Kazakhstan during the period 2021-2025?

RQ2: Which economic and institutional factors are most frequently associated with youth willingness to participate in mass protests, and how have these factors changed between 2021 and 2025?

By linking demographic shifts with socio-economic and political drivers of protest, this study aims to advance understanding of the evolving nature of youth civic engagement in Kazakhstan. It hypothesizes that increasing protest readiness among young people signals a transformation of civic identity, characterized by heightened political sensitivity, declining trust in institutions, and a growing aspiration to participate in shaping socio-political norms and governance mechanisms.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Youth have historically functioned as a central agent of political and socio-economic change, particularly during periods of structural crisis and institutional transformation. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, youth repeatedly emerged as initiators and core participants of large-scale protest movements, including May 1968 in France, the protests in Mexico and Italy in 1968, the Kent State events in the United States (1970), the Tiananmen Square protests (1989), and the Arab Spring in 2011 (Lang & De Sterck, 2012; Lewis & Hensley, 1970; Testard-Vaillant, 2018; Zhao, 2002). Despite substantial contextual variation, these cases share a common pattern: youth mobilization was driven by perceived grievances, enabled by available resources, and conditioned by political opportunity structures.

Contemporary empirical data confirms the sustained relevance of youth as a protest-prone social group. Between 2004 and 2023, 155 protest actions worldwide involved youth as the primary participants, with demands predominantly focused on economic justice, political representation, and civil rights (WorldProtests database, 2004-2023). These patterns suggest that youth protest

activity cannot be reduced to episodic mobilization but represents a structurally embedded form of political participation.

### **Grievance-Based Explanations**

Grievance theory emphasizes perceived relative deprivation as a key driver of protest behavior. Youth are particularly sensitive to discrepancies between expectations and actual socio-economic or political opportunities, especially in contexts characterized by limited upward mobility, unemployment, or restricted political voice. Numerous studies link youth protest participation to experiences of social injustice, economic exclusion, and political marginalization.

Within this framework, the demographic concept of the “youth bulge” has attracted significant scholarly attention. Proponents argue that a high proportion of young people intensifies competition for resources and increases protest potential, particularly under conditions of economic stagnation and weak labor markets (Cincotta, 2008; Urdal, 2006). However, empirical findings remain inconsistent. While some studies associate youth bulges with increased protest or conflict, others find no statistically significant effect or emphasize that demographic pressure alone is insufficient to generate mobilization (Weber, 2019).

This inconsistency has led to a refinement of grievance-based explanations, shifting attention from objective demographic indicators to subjective perceptions of injustice. Recent research increasingly highlights that grievances become politically relevant only when they are socially articulated, collectively shared, and perceived as illegitimate.

### **Political Opportunity Structure**

Political opportunity theory provides a complementary explanation by focusing on the institutional and contextual conditions that facilitate or constrain collective action. From this perspective, youth protest is more likely when political systems exhibit signs of openness, elite fragmentation, declining legitimacy, or inconsistent enforcement of repression.

Empirical studies demonstrate that similar levels of youth dissatisfaction may produce divergent outcomes depending on political opportunity structures (Chenoweth & Cebul, 2026). Periods of political transition, leadership change, or institutional reform often coincide with heightened youth mobilization, as uncertainty lowers the perceived costs of participation (Pinedo & Kruger, 2025). Conversely, highly closed or repressive systems may suppress protest despite widespread grievances (Meier et al., 2025).

Recent scholarships suggest that political opportunity structures have become increasingly fluid due to globalization and digital communication, allowing youth to bypass traditional institutional channels (UNICEF, 2024). This development partially explains why youth civic engagement has shifted away from electoral participation toward non-institutionalized and protest-based forms of action.

While political opportunity structures help explain when and where youth mobilization occurs, they do not account for how youth are able to organize and sustain protest. This is where resource mobilization theory provides a complementary perspective, emphasizing the role of organizational, informational, and communicative resources in enabling collective action.

### **Resource Mobilization and Digitalization**

Resource mobilization theory emphasizes the availability of organizational, informational, and communicative resources as a precondition for sustained protest activity. From this perspective, youth protest is not merely a reaction to grievances but a function of mobilizing capacities, including social networks, civic skills, and access to communication technologies.

The expansion of digital platforms has significantly transformed youth mobilization. Social media reduces coordination costs, facilitates rapid dissemination of protest frames, and enables decentralized forms of collective action. Empirical studies demonstrate that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter play a crucial role in organizing and sustaining protest movements, particularly among young people (Valenzuela et al., 2012).

Recent studies in Kazakhstan highlight the pivotal role of digital platforms in facilitating youth political engagement. For example, Tolen et al. (2023) demonstrate that social media use significantly enhanced mobilization and information sharing among Kazakhstani youth before and after the January 2022 Qandy Qantar events, underscoring the centrality of digital resources in contemporary protest readiness. Similarly, Bukhari (2025) and Azizi (2023) note that online platforms enable Generation Z to articulate grievances, coordinate actions, and bypass conventional institutional channels, contributing to the emergence of new forms of civic participation.

Importantly, digitalization has also altered the social geography of protest. Recent research indicates that rising levels of education and digital literacy contribute to increased protest participation among rural youth, challenging the traditional assumption that protest activity is

predominantly urban (Walker, 2025). This shift underscores the growing importance of resource-based explanations over purely structural or demographic ones.

Taken together, the perspectives of political opportunity structures and resource mobilization highlight that neither grievances nor resources alone can fully explain youth protest. An integrated approach is therefore necessary to understand the complexity of youth civic activism.

### **Integrating the Frameworks**

Taken together, the literature suggests that youth protest activity is best understood through an integrated analytical framework. Grievances constitute a necessary but insufficient condition for mobilization; political opportunity structures determine whether grievances can be translated into collective action; and resource mobilization explains how protest becomes practically feasible and sustainable.

Complementing these perspectives, the theory of value change provides a cultural–motivational dimension that helps explain variation in youth protest readiness across contexts. Authors (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005) distinguish between survival values, which emphasize economic and physical security, and self-expression values, which prioritize autonomy, participation, and political voice. Generational cohorts oriented toward self-expression values are more likely to perceive institutional shortcomings as illegitimate and to regard protest as a legitimate form of political participation. This perspective implies that, beyond structural grievances and political opportunities, prevailing value orientations shape how youth interpret constraints and possibilities for action. In contexts where self-expression values are more salient, similar structural limitations may generate higher levels of protest readiness, whereas in environments dominated by survival values, equivalent grievances may lead to political withdrawal or non-contentious engagement.

Within this integrated framework, demographic factors such as the youth bulge are treated as contextual variables whose effects depend on institutional arrangements, economic inclusion, and digital literacy. Empirical evidence increasingly suggests that education, access to information, and civic competencies exert a stronger influence on youth protest behavior than demographic size alone. Despite extensive international research, less is known about how these integrated mechanisms operate in specific national contexts, such as Kazakhstan, where youth activism is rapidly evolving.

### **Youth Civic Activism in Kazakhstan: Research Gap**

In Kazakhstan, scholarly interest in youth civic activism has intensified in recent years, particularly in the context of political changes following the leadership transition in 2019. Existing studies document growing youth engagement in civic initiatives, online activism, and issue-specific movements, including environmental and urban activism. Major cities such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent serve as focal points for new forms of civic participation.

Recent studies over the past three years have documented an increase in youth engagement in civic initiatives, including under the influence of new forms of social movements and online activism (Azizi, 2023). Experts note that this trend may contribute to the democratization of society and serve as a precondition for the formation of a distinct “Kazakh Spring” – a stage in the transformation of mechanisms of civic participation (Beisembaev, 2020; Kudaibergen, 2024). At the same time, it is emphasized that the main drivers of active participation are personal rather than institutional factors.

It is important to note that research on youth civic activity in Kazakhstan is increasingly taking on a comparative character, particularly in the context of the political regime change after 2019, marked by the transition from the presidency of Nursultan Nazarbayev to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Kilybayeva & Ibadildin, 2023). This periodization makes it possible to identify transformations in youth political culture and motivations for participation.

The regional aspect also plays a significant role: the country’s largest cities – Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent – serve as local platforms where new, citizen-initiated forms of engagement in public life are taking shape (O’Connor, 2025). Positive effects include an expanded outlook, the formation of new social capital, and growth in civic competence. However, as noted, youth participation in civic life is constrained by a number of barriers, including lack of time, information overload, and high emotional burden. Identifying these factors helps fine-tune state youth policy in order to stimulate greater engagement of the younger generation and develop their civic agency (Frigerio, 2025; Vankov et al., 2024).

In addition to analyzing general trends in youth civic activity, academic literature pays attention to specific socio-political spheres in which activism takes on more pronounced and targeted forms. One such area is youth participation in processes related to urban development policy, where the involvement of young citizens is becoming increasingly significant and is viewed as an indicator of the democratization of urban governance (Otarbayeva, 2022).

At the same time, environmental issues are gaining strategic importance as a key factor of mobilization. The “green” agenda contributes to the emergence of new forms of civic participation, including digital campaigns, urban initiatives, and public movements. Examples such as #SaveKokZhailau and #SmallTaldykol have become emblematic manifestations of environmentally oriented protest, reflecting the growth of public environmental awareness and a desire to participate in decision-making processes (O’Connor, 2025).

Another promising vector in the study of youth activism is sticker art – a form of street art functioning as a visual medium for expressing civic positions. Contemporary studies emphasize that despite its limited institutionalization and weak theoretical development in the Kazakhstani context, sticker art is gradually becoming a relevant form of symbolic protest. It is used as a means of conveying political demands and criticizing social realities, particularly within the creative and free-thinking youth community (Ibrayeva et al., 2025).

However, despite this growing body of research, empirical evidence on the motivational foundations of youth protest readiness remains limited. Most studies focus on structural conditions or observable forms of activism, while internal motivational mechanisms – such as perceptions of injustice, aspirations for self-realization, and expectations of political responsiveness – remain underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by empirically examining youth protest readiness through the combined lens of grievances, political opportunity structures, and resource mobilization. By focusing on motivational drivers within a longitudinal and nationally representative dataset, the research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of youth protest behavior in Kazakhstan and advances comparative scholarship on youth civic engagement in hybrid political contexts.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a quantitative repeated cross-sectional design based on secondary analysis of nationally representative survey data. Repeated cross-sectional studies involve collecting data from different samples of the same population at multiple time points, allowing researchers to observe population-level trends without following the same individuals longitudinally (Seita, 2016; Wang & Cheng, 2020).

A repeated cross-sectional design can be defined as a quantitative research approach in which data are collected from independent samples of the same population at different time points, allowing for the analysis of aggregate-level change over time without following the same individuals.

Within the tradition of quantitative social research, repeated cross-sectional designs are conceptually distinct from both single cross-sectional and longitudinal (panel) approaches. As noted by Earl Babbie (Babbie, 2020), cross-sectional studies are used to examine variation across populations at a given point in time, while repeated cross-sectional designs extend this logic by enabling systematic comparison across multiple time points using independent samples. Similarly, Alan Bryman (Bryman, 2016) emphasizes that such designs are particularly suitable for identifying aggregate-level social change, especially when the objective is to monitor shifts in attitudes, perceptions, and behavioral intentions at the population level rather than to trace individual trajectories.

From a survey methodology perspective, repeated cross-sectional designs are widely used in large-scale national monitoring systems, as they provide reliable estimates of population parameters over time while remaining methodologically feasible and cost-efficient (Robert Groves et al., 2009). They are also widely applied in the analysis of repeated survey data to assess macro-level trends in social and political behavior over time (Firebaugh, 1997).

To avoid conceptual ambiguity, it is important to note that this study does not employ a longitudinal or panel design, as it does not follow the same individuals across survey waves. Instead, it analyzes independently drawn samples from the same population across multiple years, which is consistent with the logic of repeated cross-sectional quantitative research.

The present study relies on annual national monitoring surveys conducted by the Scientific Research Center “Youth” and published in the reports *Youth of Kazakhstan (2021–2025)*.

The analysis focuses on identifying trends in protest readiness and its socio-economic and institutional determinants during a period of significant socio-political transformation following the January 2022 events in Kazakhstan.

Importantly, the study is strictly quantitative in nature and does not involve qualitative data collection or analysis.

## Sample

The original monitoring surveys were conducted annually among youth in Kazakhstan using nationally representative stratified multistage sampling. Each survey wave included approximately 2,000 respondents, resulting in a cumulative dataset exceeding 10,000 individuals. The sample in each year was nationally representative and constructed using a stratified multistage sampling design. Stratification factors included:

1. Region (including major cities and oblasts),
2. Urban/rural residence,
3. Ethnicity,
4. Gender,
5. Age group,
6. Education level.

Primary sampling units were selected proportionally to population size, followed by random selection of households and respondents within households. This approach ensures coverage of diverse socio-demographic segments of the youth population and allows valid cross-year comparisons.

The survey targeted different youth age cohorts to capture life-course differences in demographic, economic, and political characteristics. In 2021-2022, the survey covered youth aged 14-28. Beginning in 2023, the upper age boundary was extended to 34 years, reflecting the official institutional redefinition of youth in Kazakhstan. To facilitate analysis and comparison across waves, respondents were grouped into age categories as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Age Group Classification*

Period	Age Group Label	Age Range
2021-2022	Younger youth	14-18
	Middle youth	19-23
	Older youth	24-28
2023-2025	Younger youth	14-18
	Middle youth	19-23
	Older youth	24-28
	Extended older youth	29-34

Cohort-based differentiation is important because protest behavior and political engagement are often shaped by life-cycle stage, socio-economic dependency, labor market integration, and

interaction with state institutions. The introduction of the 29-34 age group after 2023 allows for analysis of intra-cohort differences within the broader youth category, particularly regarding employment, family formation, economic stability, and political attitudes. Maintaining consistent age-group stratification across survey waves ensures robust comparability and highlights generational and structural shifts in Kazakhstan's youth population during 2021-2025.

### **Data Sources**

This study uses secondary aggregated data derived from the national sociological monitoring reports *Youth of Kazakhstan* (2021-2025), produced by the Scientific Research Center "Youth" in cooperation with national research institutions.

Because the micro-level dataset was not accessible, the analysis relies on published statistical aggregates, including:

- mean indicators;
- percentages of respondents selecting specific answers;
- ranked lists of key protest motivations;
- demographic breakdowns reported in the monitoring reports.

Secondary data analysis is widely used in social research when large-scale national monitoring datasets are available, but raw microdata access is restricted (Williams & Shepherd, 2017).

The use of aggregated indicators restricts the analysis to descriptive statistical comparison and trend interpretation, rather than individual-level statistical modeling.

### **Data Collection Tools**

The original surveys were conducted using a structured standardized questionnaire. For the purposes of this study, secondary analysis of the aggregated survey data was performed, focusing on the following thematic blocks:

- demographic characteristics;
- socio-economic conditions;
- perceptions of public institutions;
- civic participation;
- protest attitudes.

*Note:* The original surveys were conducted using a structured standardized questionnaire administered face-to-face. The present study does not involve primary data collection but relies

exclusively on secondary analysis of aggregated quantitative indicators derived from these surveys.

A key indicator used in this study measures willingness to participate in protests through the question: “*If mass protests were occurred in your area for following reasons, would you personally be willing to participate?*”.

Respondents could indicate several possible motivations, including economic grievances, dissatisfaction with government policies, corruption, and social issues.

Although the indicator is based on a single survey question, such measures are commonly used in political participation research to capture protest potential or protest readiness when large-scale monitoring surveys are conducted (Kwak, 2022).

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected annually using a structured standardized questionnaire. Responses were tabulated, checked for completeness and consistency, and aggregated for statistical analysis. The sample included youth from Kazakhstan and was designed to ensure demographic and socio-economic representativeness. Secondary analysis of the aggregated data focused on demographic characteristics, socio-economic conditions, perceptions of public institutions, civic participation, and protest attitudes.

The data collection process included several stages:

1. questionnaire development and revision;
2. pilot testing of survey instruments;
3. nationwide fieldwork;
4. quality control procedures, including verification of completed questionnaires and consistency checks;
5. statistical aggregation and publication in annual reports.

The monitoring program applies consistent methodology across survey waves to ensure comparability of indicators over time.

### **Data Analysis**

Because the present study relies on aggregated indicators reported in annual monitoring reports, the analysis uses descriptive statistical techniques. The analytical strategy includes:

1. descriptive statistics summarizing demographic indicators and protest readiness levels across survey waves;

2. trend analysis comparing indicators between 2021 and 2025;
3. cohort comparison examining differences between youth age groups;
4. ranking analysis of the most frequently reported motivations for protest participation.

Descriptive analysis is an appropriate method when the objective is to identify patterns and trends in population-level indicators rather than estimate causal relationships (Wang & Cheng, 2020). Because the individual-level indicators dataset was not available, correlation, regression, or multivariate modeling could not be conducted. The findings therefore focus on the relative salience of protest motivations and their evolution over time rather than statistical prediction of protest participation.

This analytical approach is consistent with the logic of repeated cross-sectional research, where the primary objective is to identify patterns, distributions, and temporal trends in population-level indicators rather than to estimate causal relationships at the individual level.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The reliability of the study is supported by the use of data from a large-scale national monitoring program with consistent methodology across survey waves. Each wave includes approximately 2,000 respondents selected through a stratified multistage sampling design, ensuring high comparability over time.

Measurement reliability is ensured through the use of standardized questionnaires administered uniformly across all survey waves. This consistency allows for valid comparison of indicators between different years. External validity is supported by the nationally representative nature of the sample, which reflects the demographic and socio-economic structure of youth in Kazakhstan. However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study relies on aggregated data rather than individual-level microdata, which restricts the scope of statistical analysis. Second, key variables such as protest readiness are measured using single survey items, which may limit measurement precision. Despite these limitations, repeated cross-sectional data provide robust and widely accepted evidence for analyzing population-level trends and shifts in social and political attitudes.

### **Findings**

Analysis of official statistical data for 2021-2025 indicates a steady increase in the absolute number of young people in Kazakhstan alongside a gradual decline in their proportional share within the total population structure. According to data from the Bureau of National Statistics

(Table 2), the number of individuals aged 14-34 increased from 5.66 million in 2021 to 5.82 million in 2025 (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025). Over the same period, the share of youth in the total population decreased from 29.92% to 28.68%, reflecting faster overall population growth. These findings reveal a demographic trend in which the youth population is growing in absolute terms but decreasing proportionally, providing a clear overview of youth demographic changes over the study period.

**Table 2.***Dynamics of the number and share of youth in the overall population structure*

Age	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
14-18	1 288 574	1 422 913	1 532 919	1 616 485	1 704 121
19-23	1 101 473	1 123 356	1 148 409	1 202 006	1 258 277
24-28	1 347 037	1 287 165	1 231 265	1 172 154	1 137 560
29-34	1 923 277	1 860 924	1 813 966	1 769 050	1 717 381
Total number of youth	5 660 361	5 694 358	5 726 559	5 759 695	5 817 339
Share of youth	29.92%	29.19%	28.97%	28.75%	28.68%
Total population	18 878 966	19 503 159	19 766 807	20 033 842	20 283 399

This statistical data indicates a cohort-specific expansion within the youngest youth segment (14-18 years) in Kazakhstan. The number of individuals in this age group increased from 1,288,574 in 2021 to 1,704,121 in 2025, while older youth cohorts (24-28 and 29-34) showed a gradual decline. Although the overall share of youth in the total population decreased slightly, this internal redistribution highlights a demographic shift concentrated in the youngest cohort.

Such demographic trends carry significant socio-economic implications for the medium term. As this large group of young people enters the education system and, eventually, the labor market, the demand for educational infrastructure, vocational training, and employment opportunities is likely to rise. While this study does not directly measure educational capacity or labor market outcomes, the observed demographic shifts strongly suggest that the expansion of the youngest youth segment could exert additional pressure on social services, employment channels, and mechanisms of social integration in the years ahead.

Against this demographic background, national sociological monitoring reports (“Youth of Kazakhstan”, 2021-2025) reveal stable trends in factors associated with youth protest readiness. Throughout the observed period, economic grievances consistently ranked as the primary reported

triggers for potential participation in protest actions. As illustrated in Table 3, rising prices for food and medicine were the dominant concerns in 2021-2023, and continued to hold significant importance in 2024-2025, with a slight shift in wording to “rising prices for food”. The proportion of respondents willing to participate in protests due to price increases rose from 20.7% in 2021 to 28.2% in 2025, signaling a consistent and growing influence of economic motivations on youth protest readiness. These findings address RQ2, demonstrating that economic factors, particularly inflation and rising costs of essential goods, are the most frequently reported drivers of youth protest intentions, and that their influence has grown over the 2021-2025 period.

Utility tariff increases emerged as a major factor beginning in 2022 and remained among the top reported triggers through 2025. Reductions in social benefits were also prominent in the earlier years of observation. These findings suggest that youth protest readiness is primarily structured around material concerns directly affecting everyday living conditions. At the same time, governance-related grievances consistently appear among significant protest triggers. Corruption ranked among the leading factors in 2021 and 2023, while in later years dissatisfaction became more explicitly associated with perceived government inaction in addressing urban and rural issues, as well as arbitrary actions by government and law enforcement officials. The inclusion of these institutional factors among the most frequently cited reasons indicates that youth protest readiness is shaped not only by economic pressures but also by perceptions of institutional effectiveness and fairness.

**Table 3**

*Leading Reported Reasons for Willingness to Participate in Mass Protests among Youth in Kazakhstan, 2021-2025 (% of respondents)*

Year	1st Most Cited Reason	%	2nd Most Cited Reason	%	3rd Most Cited Reason	%
2021	Rising prices for food and medicine	20.7	Corruption	19.5	Reduction in social benefits (allowances, pensions, scholarships)	18.0
2022	Rising prices for food and medicine	25.9	Increase in utility tariffs	21.2	Reduction in social benefits (allowances, pensions, scholarships)	17.1
2023	Rising prices for food and medicine	24.1	Corruption	16.7	Dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in the country, government policies	13.5

<b>2024</b>	Rising prices for food	28.4	Increase in utility tariffs	26.4	Government inaction and reluctance to address urban/rural issues	22.9
<b>2025</b>	Rising prices for food	28.2	Increase in utility tariffs	24.9	Arbitrary actions by government officials and law enforcement authorities	24.3

*Note:* Percentages represent the proportion of respondents aged 14-34 who indicated willingness to participate in protests for the specified reason. Multiple responses were allowed. Source: National Reports “Youth of Kazakhstan”, 2021–2025.

The empirical data for 2021-2025 demonstrate three interconnected tendencies: (1) a cohort-specific demographic expansion within the youngest age group; (2) the stable predominance of economic grievances as the principal drivers of protest readiness; and (3) the consolidation of governance-related concerns as secondary but persistent motivating factors.

As shown in Table 4, economic grievances demonstrate cross-cohort consistency. Among respondents aged 14-18, the share identifying rising prices as the main protest motive ranged from 19.4% to 23.0% between 2021 and 2025. In the 19-23 cohort, the indicator fluctuated between 20.0% and 27.6%. For respondents aged 24-28, the proportion varied from 22.4% to 29.9%, reaching its highest level in 2025. Following the expansion of the age boundary, the 29-34 cohort exhibited a comparable pattern. The share selecting rising prices as the principal motive increased from 23.9% in 2023 to 31.8% in 2025, representing the highest value among all age groups in the final survey wave.

**Table 4**

*Percentage of Respondents Identifying Rising Prices for Essential Goods as the Primary Motive for Protest Participation, by Age Group, 2021-2025 (%)*

Age group	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
14-18	19.4	23.1	21.4	26.6	23.0
19-23	20.0	27.6	25.2	29.1	27.6
24-28	22.4	27.1	24.5	29.2	29.9
29-34	-	-	23.9	28.7	31.8

*Note:* The 29-34 age group was included starting from 2023, reflecting the change in the definition of the youth age boundary.

The data indicate that economic sensitivity constitutes a structurally dominant and age-transcending component of youth protest readiness during the observed period. While the absolute values vary moderately across cohorts and years, the relative stability of this motive across

demographic segments suggests a broadly shared pattern of economic concern within the youth population.

### **Discussion**

Youth protest readiness in Kazakhstan between 2021 and 2025 is influenced by a complex interplay of economic, demographic, generational, digital, and institutional-cultural factors. This study demonstrates that the primary drivers of youth mobilization are economic vulnerability, limited social guarantees, demographic pressures, generational identity, digital connectivity, and the specific institutional and cultural context of Kazakhstan. Examining these factors through multiple theoretical lenses provides a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms underpinning youth activism in hybrid political systems.

#### **Economic Factors and Basic Needs**

Economic conditions are a foundational determinant of youth protest readiness. Rising prices for essential goods, higher utility tariffs, and reductions in social benefits place significant pressures on young people, particularly in urban and peri-urban settings. These conditions shift the focus from abstract political ideals to issues of survival and material security (Inglehart, 2018). In societies with limited economic security, survival-oriented values prevail, while self-expression and political engagement become more prominent in economically stable environments. In Kazakhstan, young people's reported motivations predominantly reflect concerns for economic well-being rather than systemic political critique.

The findings align with global evidence indicating that economic precarity often serves as the initial trigger for youth-led mobilization, as observed in transitional and hybrid regimes such as Nepal, Madagascar, and Morocco (Fong, 2025; Suwal, 2025). Employment instability, access to affordable education, and inadequate social protections exacerbate grievances, reinforcing the centrality of economic drivers in protest readiness.

#### **Demographic and Structural Pressures: The Youth Bulge**

Kazakhstan's demographic profile further shapes the structural conditions for youth activism. The growth of the youngest age cohort (14-18 years) produces a "youth bulge," placing additional strain on labor markets, educational institutions, and social services (Gerling, 2018). Although this study does not establish a direct causal link between demographic growth and protest participation, the combination of a youth bulge with persistent economic insecurity creates structural vulnerabilities that increase the potential for civic mobilization.

Competition for limited resources and heightened perceptions of relative deprivation among youth amplify these pressures. Consequently, structural factors intersect with economic vulnerabilities to create an environment conducive to episodic or latent protest activity, particularly when formal channels of participation are perceived as limited or ineffective.

### **Generational Dynamics: Generation Z as a Political Actor**

Generational identity plays a key role in shaping youth protest behavior. Generation Z is characterized by a distinct political consciousness, emphasizing self-expression, civic engagement, and social participation (Fong, 2025; UNICEF, 2024). In contexts with limited institutional avenues for engagement, young people seek alternative modes of influence, including symbolic, creative, and locally oriented forms of activism.

In Kazakhstan, it can be hypothetically assumed that this younger generation may increasingly utilize protest or other forms of civic engagement to express dissatisfaction with social and economic conditions and to develop a sense of political identity. This tendency is likely reinforced by demographic trends, particularly the growth of the youth population, which places additional pressure on educational institutions, labor markets, and social services. The combination of a large youth cohort and limited formal participation channels may encourage young people to explore new forms of civic action as a means of self-assertion and of establishing the generation as a political actor. These assumptions align with theoretical perspectives suggesting that formative experiences and structural contexts shape the values, political attitudes, and modes of civic participation of a generation.

### **Digitalization and Mobility**

Digital technologies and high mobility constitute key enabling factors for youth participation (Chong et al., 2021). Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online networks facilitate coordination, rapid information dissemination, and decentralized collective action (Ibrayeva et al., 2025). These tools allow young people to engage in civic initiatives across urban and regional spaces, effectively expanding the reach and inclusivity of protest activities.

Digital connectivity also transforms grievances into actionable forms of participation, complementing economic and structural pressures. Online platforms foster communities of practice, enable knowledge-sharing about rights and civic procedures, and support experimentation with innovative protest methods, reflecting global trends in digitally mediated youth activism.

### **The Kazakhstani Context**

The institutional and cultural environment in Kazakhstan creates unique conditions for the manifestation of youth civic engagement. The country has undergone a transition from post-Soviet governance models to more modern approaches, which has contributed to increased efficiency of state institutions and the development of a competitive environment (Tarman et al., 2026). At the same time, a high degree of centralization and limited formal channels of participation encourage young people to adopt symbolic, locally oriented, and creative forms of engagement, including street art, urban initiatives, and digital projects (Kudaibergen, 2024; Otarbayeva, 2022).

Cultural norms, such as respect for social hierarchies, mitigate radical expressions of protest and promote the development of more creative and non-confrontational ways of expressing civic positions. Overall, institutional reforms and cultural frameworks together create a context in which youth gradually expand their opportunities for self-expression and civic participation, developing strategies and modes of active civic behavior that are specific to Kazakhstan.

Youth protest readiness in Kazakhstan emerges from the interaction of economic, demographic, generational, digital, and institutional-cultural factors. This integrated perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of contemporary youth civic engagement and underscores the need for combining multiple theoretical frameworks when analyzing protest behavior in hybrid political systems. The findings further suggest that policies aimed at improving economic security, expanding educational and employment opportunities, enhancing digital access, and creating inclusive institutional channels could foster constructive civic engagement while mitigating risks associated with unregulated protest activity.

### **Conclusions and limitations**

The findings indicate that youth protest readiness in Kazakhstan constitutes a stable dimension of civic attitudes rather than a reaction to isolated events. Over the period 2021-2025, this readiness reflects both demographic shifts within the youth population and the persistent influence of economic and institutional factors. In particular, intra-cohort changes in age structure shape the distribution of protest orientations, which are consistently dominated by material-economic concerns while also incorporating evaluations of government performance and institutional effectiveness.

Building on these results, the study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it provides longitudinal evidence from a Central Asian context, which remains underrepresented in comparative research on youth political participation. Second, it demonstrates that material grievances and institutional evaluations coexist within a unified motivational framework, highlighting the need to analyze economic dissatisfaction and political sensitivity as interacting dimensions rather than in isolation. Third, it situates youth protest potential within demographic dynamics, emphasizing the analytical significance of cohort composition and the institutional redefinition of youth age boundaries for understanding variations in mobilization readiness.

While these contributions are significant, several limitations should be acknowledged. The repeated cross-sectional design allows identification of aggregate-level trends but does not permit tracking individual attitudinal changes over time. The analysis focuses on self-reported willingness to participate in protests, which may diverge from actual mobilization behavior. Moreover, although the study captures major economic and governance-related motivations and their persistence across age groups, it does not directly assess the influence of digital communication patterns, informal networks, or micro-level mobilization mechanisms, which may further shape protest dynamics.

These limitations point to clear directions for future research. Panel designs, mixed-method approaches, and comparative regional studies would allow for a more nuanced understanding of how youth protest potential translates into collective action. Incorporating digital behavioral data and qualitative accounts of civic engagement could provide a more comprehensive picture of how demographic change and grievance structures interact in shaping mobilization processes.

Taken together, the results suggest that youth protest potential in Kazakhstan reflects a structurally grounded and evolving dimension of civic life. Economic motivations dominate within a broader evaluative framework that also incorporates institutional considerations. The trajectory of this potential will depend not only on socio-economic conditions but also on institutional responsiveness and the availability of legitimate participation channels, highlighting the interplay between structural pressures and governance factors.

Finally, the evidence underscores that youth protest potential should be regarded as an integral component of Kazakhstan's evolving civic landscape. Rather than being episodic or purely reactive, this readiness reflects the cumulative influence of demographic restructuring alongside persistent economic and governance-related concerns. Recognizing the interdependence of

economic, political, and social dimensions allows scholars and policymakers to better anticipate how emerging forms of youth engagement may influence broader societal change and the trajectory of political development in the region.

Thus, youth protest activity in Kazakhstan represents a complex, multi-factor phenomenon reflecting deep socio-economic, political, and cultural transformations. It demonstrates the maturity of civil society and the need for institutional reforms. Effective response requires a comprehensive state policy aimed at modernizing youth programs, creating mechanisms for legal participation, and supporting initiatives that foster the development of a critically thinking and socially active generation.

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